

The In Between by DaineYui

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Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, More to come...

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Summary:

The Lost Chapters of Long Lost Child for Part I and Part II (The Other Side)

(Aka the ones that didn't make the cut for plot purposes or scenes that were asked about by readers that inspired me!)

1. Twin? What is Twin?

Author's Note:

- For [ironexe](#), [Zilo88](#), [noDownSide](#).

A/N – It's very likely that these won't be in any chronological order. But I'll make a note as to where the specific scene/chapter would have fallen if it had made the cut! Also, I realize that the Long Lost Child and The Other Side can be rather dark to read (and especially to write!). My hope is that some of these missing scenes will be lighter in nature. If you're interested in sending me potential prompts of scenes you'd wished you'd read or hope to read, I can't promise to do all of them but I will definitely keep a list and will do my best to tackle them and gift them to whoever initially prompted them!!!

Chapter: Twin? What is Twin? (Gift for Ironexe who inspired this chappie)

Missing chappie from Part I

El frowns at Hopper's explanation of what a twin is (*she would have asked earlier on but really, her one and only focus had been Mike and he'd been way too upset to hold onto any questions. But now he was gone at Will's and she couldn't see him, couldn't be with him and so the questions about this long lost brother... this twin... had reared back into her mind and wouldn't leave her alone*). It's a sibling, different than Nancy or Holly in that twins are born at the same time. They can be identical or fraternal. She blinks at him in a clear, please explain further. Hopper sighs.

"Kid, identical means the same. With twins it means they're genetically the same." Oh shit. Now he knows he's going to have to find the definition of 'genetically'. Or maybe not. Maybe he can take a short cut. "It means they look alike."

"So...two Mikes?" She asks, frown deepening. That doesn't seem possible. Mike is Mike. How could there be two of him?

"It's an oversimplification, but sure. If Mike's twin is an identical twin, they're gonna look really similar but he's going to have a different name kiddo. He may even have a different hair cut or different personality."

"Oh." He watches and waits for her to process this information, knowing that another question is bound to follow. She may be naive to the world and certain concepts due to lack of exposure, but El /is/ smart. And she absorbs new information like a sponge. He sees her suck her bottom lip in for a brief moment and then she releases it with a little sigh.

"What is fraternal?" Hopper knew it and he can't help but grin at her, pride bubbling inside his chest at the girl's intelligence and curiosity.

"It's two siblings that are born at the same time but not identical. They're most likely gonna be of different sexes. Like a boy and a girl but..." He trails off catching himself cause he knows again, it's a bit more complicated. But hell, sciences had *never* been his forte. "It can also be a boy and a boy or a girl and girl." She nods at this and wrinkles her nose. He feels for her. This entire conversation, despite it filling him with pride, is also giving him a headache.

Time to nurse an ice-cold beer and crack open his damned dictionary. Or wait, didn't he have some encyclopedias around here?

...

It's days and days later, after Richie has been in Hawkins for several days and Mike is dealing with his "grounding" for a school fight when El's cat like curiosity finally gets the better of her. She's been visiting the Void to check on Mike nearly every day but she's yet to include Richie in that. Her focus has always been too intent on Mike but with all of what he's shared in his letters to her, she just can't wait anymore for the official introduction.

So she waits for Hopper to leave for work before sitting near

the television and switching the channel to the dead one. The one with no fun or interesting shows. Just snow.

As the dead channel appears in front of her, she quickly knots her bandanna across her eyes and then she thinks of Mike. She thinks of Richie, of what she's been told about him, an identical twin who is alike yet different from Mike. And she lets his name fall from her lips.

The Void surrounds her and she waits, just slightly impatient, as the classroom starts to slowly materialize in the dark space. She notices Mike first as always. It's like there's a magnetic pull that always leads her back to him and a smile finds its way onto her face, tugging at her lips at the sight of him. The warmth that fills her chest is comforting and she moves closer to him, careful to not focus too much on him so that the Void can continue forming itself around her.

Mike is looking straight ahead, most likely at the teacher that she cannot see or hear at the moment. But something catches his attention and for the briefest of moments, she thinks he sees her as his dark brown eyes blink up at her but then his glance moves away, slight frown furrowing his eyebrows and scrunching his forehead. The frown melts away rapidly as he suddenly rolls his eyes and shakes his head. El follows his gaze and her breath catches in her throat.

Oh...

Richie's position is slouched, leaning back in his equally small and cramped school chair and desk contraption, long legs shooting out in front of him with one foot tapping a fast beat tempo.

Twin...

It makes sense now. The word. And they *must* be identical because Richie *is* like Mike yet not. They have the same eyes, the same tall and lanky bodies, the same dark wavy curly yet not hair that looks like it would be soft to touch (*it is, at least Mike's is*). They even have a somewhat similar *feel* to them. A deep seated kindness and protective strength that El had read in Mike the first moment they'd looked at one another that dark rainy night when she'd been

lost in the woods. She'd known instinctively that she could trust him.

She feels in her gut that Richie is also like this. That he is simply *good*. She blinks in awe at seeing the two of them together and moves closer to Richie to get a better look.

He's smiling widely, brown eyes magnified by the glasses perched on a freckled nose, and his hands are very quickly folding a piece of paper into a diamond shape that he then flicks over to Mike's desk. He looks mischievous and playful and she can't help but want to laugh and join in whatever game he's playing.

Mike's expression at receiving the piece of paper is a mix of amusement and exasperation. She's seen this expression before – mainly targeting Dustin and it makes her smile widen. Yet despite the exasperation, his long pale fingers make quick work of the folding and she watches as his eyes scan the message that Richie had hurriedly jotted down. He rolls his eyes again before furtively looking up ahead as if making sure he's not going to get caught writing back to his twin.

Despite him still looking tired, the deep distress that had been causing him to shrink into himself before Richie arrived seems to be gone and she notices how his shoulders seem more straight and less rounded forward.

El watches the two of them for minutes longer, captivated by the way they speak without words and instead simple gestures, shrugs, and facial expressions. They look like they've known each other for years instead of days. And there's something satisfying seeing the two of them together. Like they're finally whole, and at peace. Like they're home.

When El finally lets the Void go, the headache she experiences is worth it. She knows that when she gets Mike's letter later that night, she'll have an easier time imagining Richie.

The Mike who's not Mike yet is.

Does it help her be more patient about when she can actually meet Mike's twin? Hell no. But that's an entirely other story and one

that Hopper has to deal with all on his own.

2. Happy Birthday!

Summary for the Chapter:

Missing Chapter from Lost Long Child - Mike and Richie turning 14!

Chapter: Happy Birthday! (Aka You're now 14!)

Missing Chappie from Part I – Takes Place Sometime Early to Mid April

Richie is unceremoniously woken up by Mikey who is grinning at him from his bed, pillow-less. Pillow-less because the motherfucker apparently had decided that it would be a hoot and half to peg Richie in the head with it. He's not in the slightest impressed and gives his brother a glare albeit still blind without his glasses.

"What the fuck, Mikey!?" Is what he thinks he says. In reality, the words come out all garbled because his face is still buried in his own pillow and so, it sounds more like "...at fk...!?" Or something along the lines. Still his tone alone can carry across his displeasure. He sniffs in his brother's general direction and reburies himself more deeply under his covers.

It's fucking Saturday. There's NO WAY he's getting up before he's damned ready to do so. Like maybe some time *after* noon. That was civilized. Not this early morning crap that he is sure it is because it's still way too dark for the sun to be at any reasonable height in the sky. And if the sun isn't up, he's not going to be. Fuck that.

"Get up! Get up!" Holy fuck he is going to *kill* his brother. What the hell is wrong with him and what had he eaten that he was this damn chipper and excited during this unholy hour, anyway?

Richie is not about to get up and merely curls up tighter under the blankets, making a grumbling growling noise that should make his position on the matter abundantly clear. Mikey apparently is being oblivious on *purpose* as the mother fucker merely bounces on

the corner of his mattress that he's not currently residing. He feels the blankets getting dragged off of him and he yowls his displeasure. It doesn't quite get him the reaction he wants though as Mikey laughs and jumps away, blankets in tow.

Richie is now 100% convinced that someone's taken his overly responsible, frowning bastard of a twin and replaced him with an absolute mouth breathing asshat! "I am going to *kill* you!!!"

"On our birthday? Really?!" Mikey isn't at all concerned with the *real* threat and merely ducks the pillows that are now being thrown in his general direction. Richie really can't see for shit without his glasses. Life really is unfair. He grumbles at the blob that is currently his twin and reaches for his glasses when Mikey's words finally hit him. *Our birthday*, what?!

Richie sits up and blinks owlshly at Mikey.

"What?" He croaks finally when Mikey doesn't answer his previously mute question. Mikey grins at him, dropping the blankets on the ground near his feet and slowly leans back against the wall.

"It's our birthday, doofus... happy birthday." When Richie simply continues to stare at him, Mikey's grin falters and he suddenly looks unsure. "... it is our birthday, right? Like they didn't change the date on me, right?"

Richie blinks again before swallowing hard. "It's already our birthday?" Mikey nods slowly and Richie can't help but mentally add up the math. In his head, the number of days, months really now, that he's seen his mom and the different number that matches the time lapsed since he's last seen the Losers dances around. It's a little like poking an open sore, where the edges had just been slowly but surely healing.

Maybe it shows on his face because Mikey comes and sits next to him, shoulders knocking into each other in a show of comfort and solidarity. His high excited energy now muted.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just..." He trails off. This wasn't the Saturday he'd had in mind. And he's not sure what to do with the information. The very real realization that he's now fourteen, away from home and friends, but still with family, a new home, and surrounded by new friends and if Mikey's excitement is any indication, they're ready to celebrate this with him... With them. It's hard to wrap his brain around it all. "...I can't believe we're already in May...or that we're gonna be... we already are I guess... fourteen." Mikey makes a little humming noise, that's not an agreement and instead is more of a confirmation of the statement. "...what...like... what the fuck should I be expecting anyway?"

"For our birthday?" The question sounds surprised. The silence that answers it is louder than any well placed *duh*, *fuckhead* would have been. Mikey gives him a slight shove for it anyway before answering. "Birthday breakfast with the family and then the Party's coming over for lunch and a sleepover." Richie blinks at his brother owlishly again behind the glasses but this time with a suspicious glint in the brown eyes. There's a sudden realization that maybe those notes that Mikey had been passing back and forth with Doe Eyes in class had not been about Ellie Belle after all like he'd originally assumed and more to do about secretly planning this whole mess.

"You plotted this!" The little smirk that comes tugging at Mikey's lips reveals all. It doesn't help that his twin jumps back up and away as if he has a 6th sense telling him that Richie is about to pummel him to death with a pillow. Not that he has any near him. Damn it.

Still... he grudgingly gets up and follows his twin's chuckling down the stairs. It feels weird. It feels like he's entering unknown territory in some ways. But a family celebrating his birthday... it couldn't be bad, could it?

...

Mike makes his way downstairs, still happy but a little bit more unsure about his grand plan than he has been all week. It had made sense before. To secretly plan out a birthday celebration that the Party could remember for the ages, weirdly, a better welcome to

Richie than they'd actually given him.

But seeing his brother's blank expression as the date sunk in... and that very real *oh fuck...what if they lied about our birthdate...* Mike's not as sure of anything anymore. Still, it's a bit too late to suddenly back pedal and there's no button to press stop, rewind and redo the past week and half. Mike sighs a little and tries to focus more on the moment versus the unknown future. Like, the fact that the smell of his favorite breakfast food is thick in the air and his stomach grumbles happily at the thought of being filled. And when he turns the corner, he can see the rest of the family right where they should be.

Holly is already in her chair, legs happily kicking the air with a paper happy birthday cone topping her blond curls. Nancy looks less enthused but is at least awake and *home*. She's just sipping on her coffee and looking like she wished she was still under her blankets, dreaming. She sees him coming and gives him a smile though, getting up to pull him into a tight hug.

"Happy Birthday Mike..." She whispers into his hair and it's really only half faked, the squirmy moves that breaks him free from her hold and the wrinkled nose expressing how gross and embarrassing it is to be so harassed by his biological cousin. But sister really. Even if it's not by blood. He breaks the façade by smiling back at her and shoving her towards Richie who is not that far behind. He gets the same treatment much to his bemused shock and really, it's good for Richie.

Especially as Aunt Karen is in line to do it next. Mike makes a face at seeing that she's wielding a camera though and groans.

"Now Michael..." She starts and his scowl deepens.

"What's up Aunt K?" Richie asks before glancing at Mike's face. "Yowza! What's gone up your..." He gets cut off with a well-placed...

"Picture time! Picture time!" Aunt Karen nearly sings it into their faces and herds them away from the table and from their Uncle who is definitely giving them a pointed look about the use of

language that had been about to be unleashed.

“But... food.” Mike tries. “It’ll get cold. We can take the stupid old pictures any time.”

“Nope, nope. Not negotiable. It’ll only take a minute...” She half wheedles, half commands and Mike sighs, shoulders slouching in defeat. He should have fucking known. He really should have.

“Really Aunt K? You want us in our pjs for this? Bedhead and all?” Richie slouches next to him, lazily draping an arm around Mike’s shoulders. Aunt Karen seemingly ignores the question but really, it’s only because she’s motioning to Nancy to come and help her. And when she’s certain she’s got an ally (*fucking traitor, he is so going to pour syrup on her eggs*), Aunt Karen turns around, comb in hand and attacks them with it. Mike knew this particular move but had not taken into account how Richie’s lack of experience in this would hinder him from evading the move.

The sigh that erupts from him may be overly dramatic (*no one will ever hear that coming from him, EVER*) although the noises that Richie are making aren’t any less dramatic- they’re just slightly more amusing if Nancy’s grin is any indicator. Mike chances a glance in Aunt Karen’s direction before flipping Nancy off. She flips him back before abruptly straightening up and looking angelic. It makes him straighten up slightly before remembering that he doesn’t *want* the stupid picture to be taken in the first place.

“Holy hell Aunt K! You don’t attack a man’s hair!” Richie gripes, hands ruffling the combed hair back up and making a mess of whatever Aunt Karen had been able to achieve just seconds before. “And definitely not without some sort of warning! Jesus woman,” Richie makes an oof at being elbowed then that shuts him up. Which is good timing as their Aunt looks slightly affronted at being called a *woman* and in that tone.

“Richie!”

“Sorry Aunt K...” He mutters while giving Mike a hard poke in the side. Mike makes a face and rubs at the spot and the two of them behave long enough for about a *million* pictures of them to be

taken. And for the food to probably be chilled which makes Mike glower by the end of the photo session. Not that he wasn't glowering before but still...

"I think I got some good ones," Aunt Karen makes a little noise of happiness, flapping the last photo out to dry before glancing at it and smiling.

"Are we done now?" Mike's question gets answered with a hand motion and Mike scampers from his position as quickly as he can to get to the table in case she finds something wrong with the pictures and changes her mind. Richie follows more slowly but he slumps into the chair next to Mike's and looks at the options that are set in front of him with obvious interest. He's quick to pile his plate with goodies and for a moment, the only noise around the table is the sound of chewing and Holly's cheerful babble.

The time for presents is announced when everyone's plates are emptied and Aunt Karen is halfway through cleaning the kitchen table with Nancy's helping hands. Holly gives an excited cry and you'd think it was her birthday with the way she lights up and does a happy dance where she is. Mike smiles at her excitement and ruffles her hair, deciding right then and there that if he got anything wrapped, he's gonna let her open it for him.

He knows at the very least that the present they got Richie isn't wrapped and has already made its way down the basement where it's meant to stay. It's weird being more excited about someone else's present and seeing their reaction than to be excited about his but it's how he feels in this very moment.

He sneaks a glance at Richie and sees his twin take Holly's excited yells with a little startled and awkward chuckle. "Whose birthday is it again?" Mike's smile widens.

"Just wait, she's excited cause she helped pick your gift out."

"Oh?"

"Yeah..."

Tbc...

A/N – Hello again, I promised this chappie sooooo long ago. I'm sorry it's taken me this long to post it. I got stuck writing just the middle part of this chapter. I couldn't write one scene and it kept me from connecting it to the next scene. So, I decided to say fuck it and end the chapter here and the birthday story will continue in another chapter. Also this may or may not fully make sense with the Long Lost Child timeline date wise but I thought it'd be cute to see the Wheelers and the Party celebrate the boys' birthdays before everything goes to hell. Enjoy!

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Birthday chappie part II

Chapter: Happy Birthday! (Aka You're now 14!) Part II

Missing Chappie from Part I

Several hours later, breakfast long ago finished and digested, finds Richie and the Party down in the basement. He's more than content. He's happy and full of other emotions that he thinks is still shock and overwhelm that he'd received more than just a birthday mention from his new family. It all feels a bit like a dream. And so, his mind wanders away from the shock of what the morning had brought and instead focuses on the here and now.

"When were all of you fuckers' born anyway?" Richie asks, after he's successfully caught, chewed and swallowed the popcorn that Red had thrown his way. Dusty is frowning at the question and it's clear he's debating whether the question was stated in a grammatically correct way. Such a N.E.R.D!

Richie pegs a popcorn his way and it bounces off the boy's frown leading Richie to make a whoop noise that is purely self-congratulating. The face that Dusty makes is worth the scowl that Richie gets from Mikey. Still, he makes sure to scoop the fallen popcorn off the floor before he can get lectured and tosses it into the trash can that's nearby.

Stalker intervenes by smoothly offering everyone's birthdates and Richie is content in the knowledge that he hasn't missed any of them, effectively making him and Mikey the oldest in the group. Until Doe Eye's birthday is revealed. Richie stops and looks at Doe Eyes.

"Wait... what? You're older than me!?" Doe Eyes blinks,

cheeks flushing slightly.

“What, you couldn’t tell that Will the Wise was older than you?” Dusty hoots his amusement. “He’s the most mature of us all! And a total Pisces...”

“You don’t even believe in that crap.” Stalker mutters, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. The fact that Dusty knows about Astrology despite apparently not believing in it, is something for Richie to tackle at a later date. As it is, Dusty is already bantering back with Stalker about how yes, despite thinking Astrology is complete *bull shit*, even *he* had to admit that Will was *the* ultimate Pisces.

“Huh... that’s hot.”

“Excuse me... what?!” Dusty exclaims, nearly stuttering in surprise. “What is? Will being a Pisces or that he’s older than you?” Red is laughing in the background while Mikey can be seen rolling his eyes towards the ceiling. Stalker just looks a bit caught while Doe Eyes goes bright red.

Richie smirks in response, knowing that it’ll drive Dusty nuts not knowing which it actually is.

“You are so weird.” Dusty finally mutters. “Mike, your brother is so weird.”

“Why are you telling *me* this?!” Mikey sounds affronted.

“Yeah, you’re really not one to talk, Dustin.” Stalker adds. “With your years-long crush on Nancy...”

“Wait, what?” Richie sits up. “You like Nancy too? That makes the total of guys that are into her that *I* know of up to at least four. Does everyone in this town have a thing for our cuz, Mikey? What the hell is up with that?”

“Don’t ask me,” Mikey mutters with a shrug. “It’s gross.” His disgusted and slightly confused expression makes both Red and Doe Eyes laugh at Mikey.

“Hey now, I like her *not* because she’s older but because she’s smart and pretty and nice and...” Dusty tries to explain and Richie shakes his head, deciding that the loss of another popcorn is worth it if it shuts up Dusty’s monologue on Nancy’s winning attributes.

“Shut up Shirley Temple before you give Mikey a coronary.” Richie adds in a playful warning. Dusty’s expression at the new nickname makes Richie laugh just a little. He thinks it may make it worth continuing to use Shirley Temple as the curly haired boy huffs and looks pained towards the rest of the gang. He’s clearly asking for help and Red is laughing too hard to give it to him. Mikey’s still red in the face and NOT in the mood to help his friend out either after the Nancy soliloquy that Dusty had just spouted. Doe Eyes, however, comes to his aid quickly, beating Stalker who’d looked torn between stepping in and staying the fuck out of this, his loyalty to both his friends clearly warring with one another in this instance.

“Maybe it’s time for presents?” Doe Eyes offers as the perfect distraction.

“Ooh yeah,” Red exclaims excitedly while she brushes her eyes free of tears of mirth.

“What?! It’s too early for presents.” Dusty mutters. “It should be after cake.”

“Dude,” Stalker sighs. “Why...” He shakes his head. “You’re digging your own grave, man and then biting the hand that’s trying to get you out of it.”

“What?!” Dusty squawks but Richie thinks Stalker’s right on and just wonders how it’ll all play out.

Doe Eyes and Red though are ignoring the two of them and instead taking charge, clearly not caring about the supposed birthday protocol that Dusty feels is *highly* important. Richie feels whatever teasing retort that had been on his lips fade from his brain as he watches the two of them looking excited. It tugs at something under his rib cage that’s as fragile as the fluttering beat of butterfly wings.

The Losers... Richie shakes his head, forcing himself NOT to

fucking go there and bring his giddy mood down with nostalgia. His hands instead go to forcing his curls out of his face and forehead briefly. They fall back and in the way just as quickly but he sorta likes it that way anyway. The unruly look.

He suddenly feels awkward and can't help glancing at Mikey for help. What sort of help he needs or is asking for, he's not quite sure and Mikey's current fond and happy expression isn't exactly helping.

Although...

Richie finds himself moving so he can sit next to his twin who merely shifts wordlessly to accommodate him getting into his personal space once more.

"You're gonna love this..." Red states. She's pulling something out of her backpack while Doe Eyes is pulling two large manila colored envelopes to his chest. "Oy, dorks! You joining us, or what?" She calls out to Dusty and Stalker who snap to attention and drop their squabbling over the birthday protocol. It pulls a little grin out of him despite awkwardness tightening his chest and throat. Dusty looks ruffled like a kitten, but the frown on his face feels more like it's for show more than anything as it disappears quickly as he tugs a plastic bag to him. He even leans forward as Red calls dibs on going first, looking more excited than Richie expected him to be. Stalker, however, shakes his head.

"Uh huh...We talked about this remember? You go last cause none of us can beat your gift." Red glares at her boyfriend and wrinkles her nose at him.

"Way to keep talking it up, Stalker." She mutters and he simply gives her a pointed look. "Fine, who then is gonna start us off?"

Richie watches bemused as they actually have a rock-paper-scissors battle over this between Stalker, Doe Eyes and Dusty. It's also more than a little hilarious to him that Dusty ends up winning since he'd been bitching about this happening too early in the day.

The gift of picked out candies specifically suited for their

tastes along with books (fantasy for Richie and nerdy a/v textbook looking *thing* for Mikey) is oddly sweet and so very Dusty. Stalker gets them their very own VHS copy of the Karate Kid and that gets them all distracted in reliving some of the best moments. Such as the chopsticks scene and the more epic fight scenes. Red brings them back to order after much laughter at how uncoordinated they all are, especially when Richie's *high* kick leaves him on his back and winded.

Doe Eyes helps Richie get back up and he looks slightly nervous now that it's his turn. As if he's not sure how Richie's gonna react to his particular gift. Richie doesn't really get *why* cause honestly, all of this is already too much. A pat on the back, a cheerful happy birthday sent his way, would have already made his freaking day.

Mikey looks curious, eyes catching Will's as he carefully opens his larger envelope. Richie can't help but glance as a piece of paper slides out and reveals what looks to be pencil portrait of the two of them. It's shaded and...

Dusty pokes him then, silently reminding him that he has his very own envelope to open. So, he does, although, he feels nervous now too. He gets his own drawing. It's a sketch of all of them. The Party members with Richie included in the group and he feels as Mikey leans into him to take a peek.

"You're so good, Will." Dusty says with a lot of affection and totally ruffles the smaller boy's hair. "How long did it take you this time?" Doe Eyes makes a noise of embarrassment, eyes shy as he catches Richie looking at him with disbelief.

"...thank you..." Mikey says for the both of them, smile full and warm while Richie works on trying to swallow again. He keeps glancing down at the picture and back at Doe Eyes.

He's not quite sure *anything* could quite top this. And if something does then dear god, he's gonna be a fucking blubbery sort of mess. Shit, this group, they... they were too much.

His twin gives him his picture to hold briefly as he goes to

pull up a binder that's apparently full of Doe Eyes's drawings that Mikey has accumulated over the course of their friendship (*and fuck no, Richie was NOT jealous of this. That would just be fucking weird.*). It's cute though how Doe Eyes blushes brighter than ever at seeing that, especially when Richie and Red both demand to flip through the binder and see them all.

"Mike..." Doe Eyes kind of whines but Mikey simply smiles, carefully adding the newest picture to be protected there. He also lets Richie and Red get their way because after all, Doe Eyes' pictures are amazing. Even the ones from when they were younger. Well, those are more hilarious and cute than amazing perhaps. But still. They're clearly treasures. Mikey knows this and treats them as such.

And Richie needs to frame his. He doesn't have a place to put his yet but he carefully holds on to his anyway. Not wanting his to get lost in all of the ones that Mikey already owns.

Red sighs as they get to the end of the binder. "I have no idea why you made me go last. My gift is NOT going to top that." She gives Stalker a look and his eyes widen with some confusion. It's clear that maybe due to being used to getting a drawing as a birthday gift, he no longer sees how inherently cool and meaningful they are. But she gets it.

But again, Red is by far the coolest of the bunch in this rag tag of a group, Doe Eyes rivaling for that position in Richie's mind depending on the day and his mood. Still, she gives Richie a smaller envelope and he doesn't waste any time to rip it open, although he feels... vulnerable. He's not sure he can stand another so well chosen gift, showing that despite the relative short amount of time he's been with them, that they know him. They accept him. And more than that, they like him. He's one of them, now.

Inside the ripped envelope is a handmade coupon granting him skateboarding lessons which has him laughing.

"Oh Red, this is awesome."

"Tubular even. She doesn't even let *me* touch it!" Stalker exclaims. He doesn't see what coupon she made for Mikey but has an

idea or two that it does NOT include the same kind of lessons.

They spend the rest of the afternoon outside, the group watching Richie as Red gives him lessons (*and him falling on his ass more often than not*) before they get called inside to eat cake. It sucks when Red has to go home, but neither Aunt Karen nor Red's mom think it's wise to let her sleepover with a bunch of boys. It's a bit asinine but it is what it is.

The rest of the gang shuffles back to the basement and their spirits don't stay dampened for long as they take turns playing with the used drum set that has joined the many items already stuffed in the basement. All of it Mikey's except now for the drum set that's Richie's courtesy of the Wheeler family. When it gets late and they get scolded that they need to sleep, they put on the Karate Kid to play in the background. And one by one, they fall asleep, bellies full of cake and candy and so much more.

...

Mike isn't surprised when he finds himself waking up, alerted by the way that Richie is moving in his sleeping bag next to him. Neither of them had taken their sleep meds and Mike winces as he tries to move quickly to wake Richie before whatever nightmare his twin's brain concocted this time causes *everyone* to wake up. He knows that Richie would hate that and...

He grips his twin's shoulder, giving it a little shake just as Richie makes a hissed noise of, "no... please..." and "don't!" Mike tries to reassure him softly that it's just a dream as he continues to try to get him to wake up but it still takes a minute or so before Richie does actually snap awake, large eyes taking in the room around him and Mike in a way that clearly shows he's disoriented. Mike doesn't really give him the time to orient himself, simply takes both of Richie's hands in his before pulling him up and into a hard hug.

"It's okay..." He can feel the way Richie's heart is hammering and knows that the simple reassurance isn't going to be enough. He walks them to the bathroom and shuts the door just in time when Richie sorta collapses, muttering about how he's shit, absolute and complete shit and he doesn't deserve *any* of this and fuck, fuck,

fuck...

And Mike simply sits with him, waiting for the storm to pass.

On the other side of the door, Lucas and Will have their eyes open and both are holding their breath. Lucas wishes that he hadn't woken up while Will bites the inside of his cheek hard until his mouth fills with blood. They don't know that the other is awake and so they stay isolated and alone as they try hard not to overhear the muffled sounds coming from the closed bathroom.

Tbc...

A/N - Apparently, even when I'm trying to write light and fluffy chapters, angst manages to weave its ugly head in there. Sweatdrops. Ah well, I tried... Enjoy everyone!

4. Happy Birthday! (Aka You're now 14!) and it's Aftermath

Summary for the Chapter:

Last bit about the 14th birthday celebration for the twins, specifically its aftermath. Warning, it starts off cute but *wrinkles nose* angst sneaks in at the end. You've been warned!

Chapter: Happy Birthday! (Aka You're now 14!) and it's Aftermath

Missing Chappie from Part I and Part II, weirdly enough.

It's a couple days after the twin's birthday that Richie finds a way to finally (*fucking finally*) snag Doe Eyes on his own. He's nervous and hesitant in a way that he normally isn't and it's showing in the way that his eyes keep looking elsewhere and his entire body seems amped up with an energy that is contagious. Doe Eyes' already wide eyes look at him in question, worry lining his face and Richie finds himself pushing the hastily (*and badly*) wrapped present in the smaller boy's hands like it's on fire the second he's able to get his locker open.

It's newspaper he used to wrap the present cause like hell he was gonna give ANY ONE ammunition to tease him with. Even if that said someone was just his twin. And Nancy. Or God forbid, Aunt Karen. (*He can imagine her camera ready, snapping a couple pictures to forever keep in memory, proof that Richie fucking Tozier has a heart. No fucking thank you.*)

"Richie?" Doe Eyes looks even more bewildered at having something shoved into his hands so unceremoniously. Especially after Richie had called to him asking for his help to do... Richie's mind has no actual idea what sort of excuse he'd come up with to get the smaller boy to follow him to his locker versus going to recess outside with the rest of the gang. He has a small idea that Mikey hadn't found it entirely convincing if the sharp curious look his twin gave him was any indication, but he also hadn't stopped the two of them

so... whatever. He'd deal with his twin later. (*Through subterfuge and really, being one gigantic pain in the ass so that Mikey baby no longer even remembers what he was curious about in the first place!*)

"Just... something. I mean... I missed your birthday. That's not really fair, especially when you gave me something so fucking cool, so... here's something. Small, kinda crappy. But... Happy belated birthday?" (*Fucking shoot his mouth. Seriously! Could he sound any more...*).

"Oh!" Does Eyes blinks and looks back down at his hands. "You didn't need to."

"I know that! I wanted to..." He says lamely, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. "You're a cool dude, cutie pie." The shy smile that tugs at Doe Eyes lips makes him feel warm inside.

"Is it okay if I open it now?" He asks and Richie nods, the words, 'sure' and 'if you want', tumbling out of his mouth in a new speed record he didn't even know his tongue could handle. How Doe Eyes makes sense of it is beyond him, but he must have as he carefully undoes the wrapping, ignoring the verbal poke from Richie that it's just crappy newspaper and he could in fact, bloody rip it. God knows Richie had just in trying to wrap it in the first place. If the pace gets any fucking slower, Richie is gonna explode anyway from sheer... he doesn't even fucking know at this point.

Doe Eyes smile gets bigger as he finally reveals the drawing pad.

"Thank you, Richie."

He winces at the thanks, feeling heat hit his cheeks and he ducks his head as his hand comes to wave at the air, as if he could physically erase them from existence.

"It's nothing really. It's what they had at Melvald's and I don't know shit about art, so I hope it's okay and, I mean, it's better than what I was originally planning anyway. Which is just to promise that I'll be there for your next birthday. Cause I mean, who gives a flying fuck..." (*And he's fucking rambling AGAIN!*). Doe Eyes simply

listens, not commenting until Richie has to finally stop to get a breath in before he actually passes out.

“It’s perfect actually. I was about to run out of paper.” He says quietly, still smiling. “But I’m keeping you to that promise, Richie, cause I do.” Doe Eyes gives him what could be the equivalent of a hug. “Give a flying fuck.” It’s more like a full body lean as the smaller of the two keeps his arms around the sketch book, hugging it to his chest. Like it’s precious or something.

All of it makes Richie stand straight as he feels the weight of Doe Eyes leaning against him and he blinks, Doe Eyes’ words not at all reaching his little overwhelmed brain. Richie finds himself just saying, “oh” in response. He’s not quite sure what to do now and his body has never felt more awkward.

Doe Eye saves him by using his entire body to nudge him forward.

“Come on, the rest of them are gonna start to wonder. And worry. And then they’ll never stop asking.” He says with a sigh. And Richie agrees with that sigh. He really doesn’t want to answer their questions when he’s not quite sure what the hell all of this means anyway. Still, he smiles the rest of the day in a way that apparently creeps the hell out of Dusty (*even better*) and confuses Mikey, who keeps glancing between him and Doe Eyes as if the answer could be found there.

...

Sometime in March, 1986. Day 298.

Will finds it hard to be in a celebrating sort of mood. The fact that he’s turning 15 today means very little to him. Still, for his mother and his brother’s sake, he tries to smile. He knows how much it means to them to still be able to celebrate his birthday. And he gets it.

It just... it just hurts. Because he knows it’s not *right*. There’s

two giant holes missing in his life and nothing can make that right. Nothing can fix it.

The smile on his face is stiff and heavy. He doesn't balk however when his brother ruffles his hair and reminds him to make a wish before blowing out the candles. He knows the wish he's gonna make.

It comes so easily and quickly to him and he has to blink rapidly to keep the tears at bay. Hopefully the candles will be the cheap kind from Melvand's (*what else could they be, knowing his family?*) and they'll cause a lot of smoke that he can use as an excuse to explain away the tears. He quickly blows all fifteen out in one go and smiles again as his mom makes a big deal that his wish will come true, as she attempts to fan the smoke away. Jonathan snaps another picture, eyes kind but sad. Like he knows Will's smile is forced and for show.

It's just going to be a family affair this year. He said no to a party with friends. Their absence would stand out too much and he wouldn't be able to keep the mask up.

But God, he hopes his mother's right. He really hopes he gets his wish.

Richie had promised after all. That he'd be here to celebrate his birthday... and maybe this year's was too much to hope for, but next year? He could hope, right?

Tbc...

5. The Pianist and the Ballerina

Summary for the Chapter:

A snapshot in time captured in a dusty family home video that Richie gets to watch during "sick day" from school...

Chapter: The Pianist and the Ballerina

Missing chappie from during Part I, a little after the boys' birthday

Richie wakes up, body still feeling heavy and useless but at least once he's able to pry his eyes open, they stay open this time. He rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling without truly focusing on one particular shadow. It's all a blurry mess anyway. It's just something to do as he tries to wait for the medication to continue making its way out of him. He knows without needing to look, that he's slept through the alarm again and that Mikey's probably long gone to school. It's more than a little frustrating and Richie rubs at his face, trying to wipe away the scowl and the last of the sleepiness from his features. He needs to change his thinking, man.

He should be happy to have a free pass from school!

It's just weird not to have Mikey by his side to enjoy it. The scowl threatens to come back and so Richie groans, blindly searching for his glasses on the bedside table before erupting out of the cocoon he'd created with his blankets. It's most definitely time to get up and definitely time to make sure he's surrounded by others versus left alone to his thoughts.

As Richie makes his way down the stairs, he can hear Aunt Karen and the munchkin talking to one another. He peers around the corner, ruefully running a hand in his wild bedhead and wondering belatedly if he should just quickly turn back and make himself presentable before joining them.

The two have got super good hearing though and they turn

nearly as one to face him. There's a squeal and a tackle to the legs from the midget while Aunt Karen gives him a more dignified and passive greeting that takes the shape of a smile and a wave.

"Good morning Richie, ready for breakfast?" His stomach answers the question for him, grumbling so loudly that Holly giggles, hand coming to pat at it gently.

...

He's not quite sure how they got onto the topic but he can't hide that he's sort of fascinated to hear the stories of Nancy and Mikey as kids. Richie notices that Holly's also enjoying the stories, eyes wide and focused. It's really only her legs swinging wildly under the table that is the only movement she makes as she listens.

"...they used to make shows for us all the time. Michael playing the piano while Nancy danced to the music." Aunt Karen trails off, bending down to take Richie's now empty plate from him. The gesture is automatic and it still baffles him. This having a mother figure actually mothering him and picking up after him.

"What made them stop?" He asks, still watching Aunt Karen as she carefully rinses the plate off before placing it in the dishwasher. The question is a fair one, 'cause as far as he knows, Mikey and Nancy have NOT put on any sort of show since he's been here. And he has a feeling that it's been maybe years since they have. Maybe even before Holly arrived if her huge eyes are any indication to the shared surprise he feels.

"Oh, hormones mainly. Nancy suddenly was too cool and busy to hang out with Michael and well...that led to Michael being too cool to play the piano." Aunt Karen shrugs, smile a little sad. "I have the home videos of some of the shows if you're interested..." She offers after a pause and seems surprised when Richie nods so quickly he actually gives himself a crick in the neck. It makes her laugh at his enthusiasm and she makes him promise not to tease Mikey afterwards because they all know who would get the death glares and it's not going to be Richie. He promises with crossed fingers behind his back and a wink to Holly who giggles and raises her arms in a silent plea to be taken out of her high chair. Richie

obliges so Aunt Karen can focus on the real task at hand. Those home videos.

It's strange but soothing to end up all three of them curled up on the sofa, each with their own blanket wrapped around their shoulders not because it's cold but for sheer comfort. The television screen is bright, and the quality of the home video isn't the best but the classical music that's being played with only a note that's off key here and there and a stumbled pause is clear in sound. The image sometimes moves as if whoever is holding the camera suddenly had an itch to scratch or was startled but a tiny Nancy is always center stage of the carpeted living room. She's as graceful as any tiny kid can be as she twirls around, clearly making up the choreography up as she goes. Sometimes it matches the music, sometimes it's like she's listening to an entirely different song than what Mikey is playing. It doesn't really matter though. It's pretty (*pretty fucking funny and adorable*) all the same. And it's clear that she's enjoying herself.

When Mikey makes a mistake, she merely throws him the kid version of what would become the patented Wheeler bitch face and it makes Richie smile just a little even though what he feels inside is sad and hollow. The camera moves, Aunt Karen's voice whispering at both Mikey and Nancy to continue. Ted, also off camera, mutters something about how *the show must go on*. And Richie has to roll his eyes at hearing the man's voice. He really is a walking hulk of a cliché whenever he does bother to speak.

Mikey is suddenly the one that the camera is focusing on. His eyes look huge in the pale round face, cheeks too big and Richie has a small inane thought that *man*, they did kinda look like frogs as kids. Not so much now that adolescence has been melting the baby fat from their faces but then... wooh boy. He can see it.

The kid version of Mikey looks caught. A little scared even but at Aunt Karen's gentle urgings, he wrinkles his nose before sighing and placing his fingers back down on the keys. He starts to play again, all focused attention and energy.

The scene on the television screen ends abruptly, the tape clearly done and needing to be rewound. Richie's left contemplating that while Mikey was playing music and putting on shows, he'd...

he'd been what?

Making jokes, being loud, trying to catch someone's attention to simply have proof that he did in fact exist and did in fact matter.

He blinks when Holly's small body starts squirming besides him and he realizes belatedly that she's been talking to him. He has no idea what she wants but knows quickly and undeniably, that he'll go all in.

Anything to stop him thinking.

Anything to stop being alone.

And will he tease his twin mercilessly about this home video, about piano concerts, about baby cheeks, and little frog looks? Sure. Fucking absolutely. Richie Trashmouth Tozier will be at his fucking finest, fuckers. But it'll hurt a bit too. Most likely. Maybe. Whatever.

Every art form has its price...

Tbc...

A/N - Just a little something as I continue to work on the actual story... Hope all of you are well!!! <3

6. Welcome to Castle Byers, Richie!

Summary for the Chapter:

Gift for Zilo88 who inspired the chapter. Takes place after The Other Side concludes, early Fall. The Party members decide to meet in Castle Byers, a first for Richie. And maybe even Max.

Chapter: Welcome to Castle Byers, Richie! (Gift for Zilo88 who inspired the chappie)

Missing chappie from after Part II concludes

Richie blinks at the sight before him. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting (*no, that's a damned lie. He knew exactly what he'd been expecting and this isn't fucking anywhere near what he'd been expecting*)... and he finds himself slowing down just a smidgeon. It causes him to tug on Doe Eyes' hand inadvertently and he sees the shorter teen throw a look behind him, wide eyes expressing the concern loudly and clearly.

"Everything okay?" He still asks and Richie licks his lips, wondering how to explain the surprise at seeing Castle Byers in person. He wonders vaguely again how in all hells Doe Eyes survived the Upside Down and the demogorgon at the age of twelve and then the Mind Flayer at thirteen years old if this had been his main hiding space.

In the epic retelling of Doe Eye's and Ellie Belle's story, Richie had been left alone with his imagination to fill in certain details. Like the Quarry wall (*definitely fucking taller than he'd imagined it*) and the monsters (*until he'd had the most unfortunate experience of meeting them in person. He hoped never to ever have to deal with that shit again. And yeah call him a fucking coward but he viewed it more as having a really healthy survival instinct thank you very fucking much. And he's had more than his fair share of monsters. He's truly had his fill. Really. For however many fucking life times he'll be granted, if you believe in reincarnation and all that crap. Anyway, he's digressing*).

And well, he'd also imagined Castle Byers too.

He'd imagined an underground fort, wooden panels providing a security while also a vague claustrophobic feeling after imagining (*remembering*) Eds inspecting the handiwork and finding it faulty, pointing out every possible security risk under the sun. (*Really hadn't helped when a wooden panel had dropped from the ceiling just following the verbal diatribe*). He'd imagined all sorts of nooks and crannies and spider webs. Stashes of comic books and tins filled with enough shower caps for the whole Party – even those who would refuse to wear the dorky-pussy looking things cause honestly, who cared about a little fucking dirt and spiders dropping on your head unannounced. Like seriously? There were more serious fish to fry in this world. (*Like getting to the hammock first.*)

But what he's standing in front of is barely big enough to hold two or three of them comfortably. He knows that they've grown – some more than others – but still. He has the odd sensation that he's going to have to weirdly contort himself to not accidentally kick out some of the branches that make up the walls. It's gonna look fucking weird. But better that than mistakenly bringing down the... *fort* that had kept Doe Eyes safe so many years ago.

He thinks.

"You ... hid... *here?*" He asks, still blinking at the sight in front of him and not seeing it change any. It's still plain as day, not hidden at all, and the old dirty sheet that blocks the entrance billows in a sudden gust of wind. He can imagine, if objects could talk, which they can't and thank the fuck, that the motion is the equivalent of a middle finger at his incredulous tone.

Doe Eyes if anything looks more confused than concerned. Their hands drop away from one another naturally. It's not like Doe Eyes is still showing him the way. They're fucking here. Still, he misses the warmth immediately and he knows it would bother him more if he wasn't still stuck in contemplating the so called Castle and rewriting the way he'd imagined Doe Eye's story while in the Upside Down. "Uhm..." Doe Eyes' eyebrows furrow together as he contemplates less Richie's question and more the tone in which it's being asked. "Yes?"

“How...? Like... fucking how?” And with that asked, Richie takes the last few steps and pokes his head in through the blanket to see if he’s somehow missing something from looking at the place from the outside only. Cause from the outside, holy shit. He’s surprised it’s still standing. It reminds him vaguely of the three little pigs tale. All you need is one big bad wolf to blow the whole mess down.

But the wolf had come. And he’d puffed and puffed and Doe Eyes was still here. Same with his Castle.

Richie has to blink a bit as his vision adapts to the change in light. It’s not *that* much darker in here but just enough to be a pain. It does look larger inside. The walls are still just random pieces of wood – some sturdier and thicker looking than others – stuck together but the ground consists of blankets upon blankets. And it’s far homier than he expects it to be.

It *feels* like Doe Eyes.

And that doesn’t quite make sense and yet it does too. It’s in the little details. The photographs of the Party strewn about, the many sketching supplies spread out and over on the cozy looking nest, and the multitude of finished drawings pinned on the rickety looking walls and the ones that aren’t quite completed scattered around on the ground. Not forgotten but pushed aside for now. It’s the microscope that’s not at all dusty despite it being housed in the middle of the woods because of course it’s beloved and still used. Because Doe Eyes balances both art and science. Intuition and facts.

It’s comforting. Accepting. Warm.

“You know...” Doe Eyes starts, tone still mildly confused but a whole heck of a lot amused and exasperated at the same time. “You’re only allowed in with a password.”

Richie finds himself snorting and pulling his head out from the sheet. He can feel the way it drags his growing curls right into his face, some of them catching in his glasses. “Password? Really, sweetheart? You’re gonna invite me here and then not let me in? What the fuck is that about? Rude. Just rude cutie pie. You’re too

cute to be rude.” Not like the sheet would keep him from simply barging in without the password. But that seems too obvious to point out.

Doe Eyes simply rolls his eyes and nudges Richie aside with a shoulder and an elbow. Just hard enough that it’s a warning. A boundary not to cross but its not so hard it hurts. Richie still whines about it and rubs at his chest where the elbow landed. Doe Eyes’ got sharp bones and he’s stronger than he looks. Clearly. Surviving the demogorgon in this place... Richie shakes his head and nearly misses the whispered password being sent his way. He blinks again and Doe Eyes disappears inside the Castle, sheet falling in place behind him.

Huh.

Richie clears his throat before sighing just a bit and saying the password out loud. *(Had the Losers bothered with a password? Maybe. Maybe not. The memories are there but grayed out, losing the peskiest of details that really aren’t that fucking important right? No. Not that important. He’s had so much more on his mind than to remember whether Haystack in his fucking nerdy architectural prowess – really to fucking win over Bevie cause let’s be real about the motivations now – had required a password for his underground haven he’d built them).* Doe Eyes doesn’t let him sit outside too long, the cheerful ‘come in’ welcoming Richie to enter.

He does.

And crawls his way to the opposite corner, making sure to keep his long limbs from knocking something over and taking the whole shit down on top of their heads. The two of them sit in silence for a bit as Richie continues to take in the details. He’s focusing on everything but Doe Eyes who suddenly seems nervous, hands fiddling with the ends of his sleeves that fall close to the end of his finger tips. It’s Fall and it’s getting cold outside and Richie’s willing to bet the shirt is one of Jonathan’s older cast offs.

Doe Eyes is following where Richie looks, as if he too, is suddenly seeing the place for the first time.

“Cutie pie, if I didn’t know you and I was ignoring the fact

that the rest of the gang are just minutes behind us..." (*though how they'll ALL fit in here is still beyond his comprehension. They're gonna have to fucking sit on top of one another!*) "... I'd think this was a ploy to get hot and heavy with me." He finally ends the sentence, giving Doe Eyes his most flirty and charming smirk before spreading out more on the make shift bed. It's a tight squeeze and he can't fully straighten out his long legs, but he is laying down more than he is sitting up.

Doe Eyes makes a noise that's somewhere between a polite cough and an embarrassed choke. It makes Richie look over at him and wink at him. Which cues more blushing but no verbal response. Just a roll of his hazel-brown eyes and a general gentle kick that's more of a shove from his socked toes.

If they had more space, Richie would have grabbed a hold of that foot and tickled it mercilessly. But there's not more space and there's something...special about Castle Byers. It's not just that it was Doe Eyes' safe space during the whole Upside Down saga. There's more to it. He can tell. There's a history here. And it needs to be respected. As much as Richie can show it respect. After all, he couldn't *entirely* turn off his mouth. He'd be Mikey if he did and the world didn't fucking need TWO Mikey's. One overly stuffy responsible twin was quite enough, thanks much.

So yes, he stuffs down the impulse to pull Doe Eyes' foot and tickle him. He still does swipe at it and just tug at it gently so that Doe Eyes' is pulled towards him vs. staying stuck in the corner near the pillows. He looks way too small, way too curled in on himself there. And Richie's not in the headspace to deal with the vulnerability head on. Not entirely.

His grin grows as he hears Doe Eyes' yelp of surprise at the move. He can feel the way the shorter teen is one big ball of tension, probably expecting more than Richie just tugging his foot onto his chest and resting it there, hand coming to gently tap a nameless rhythm.

"Seriously?! You're impossible..." Doe Eyes mutters, half under his breath but he doesn't fight Richie for his foot back and after some squirming around to get in a more comfortable position,

Richie's chest suddenly finds himself the home for two feet.

The companionable silence doesn't last too long. Surprisingly though, it's Doe Eyes who breaks it. Maybe it's because Richie had been busy looking over the drawings and photographs surrounding him. They're snapshots in time and Richie is soaking the information in, one at a time. It's like puzzle pieces, filling gaps of knowledge or little details here and there about the Party before everything went to hell in Hawkins and maybe just a bit after it did too.

"I know ...it may not look like much but..." The words trail off and Richie's pulled away from looking at the picture of the Party members, Ellie Belle and Red missing, dressed in ghostbusters outfits. Must have been Halloween a handful years ago judging by the pre-teen chubby looking cheeks and the way too excited and innocent smiles on all of their faces. He glances back at Doe Eyes' face, giving him his full attention instead. "... it's... even after everything that happened... it's home." Doe Eyes finishes lamely, shoulders shrugging. "This is always the place I could turn to when I needed to escape..."

And Richie's in tune enough that he can read the subtext. Escape from not just monsters from other dimensions but also the very real and sometimes even scarier human monsters. He wonders if the kid's dad is among the numerous bullies Doe Eyes' has had to deal with and hide from.

He finds himself squeezing the anklebone briefly before resuming the tapping. It's just a *I hear you* and a *I understand*. A *I'm here for you* and *I'm listening* that's being said with a simple gesture. He's getting better at those he thinks and he feels the other teen relaxing further next to him.

"Did you build it by yourself or with the Party?" He asks, pulled to continue the conversation and to not leave Doe Eyes struggling in a vulnerable place all his own. He thinks that he was right in his earlier assessment. Castle Byers is Byers himself. It may look weak and vulnerable from the outside but it's stronger and withstood so fucking more than expected by anyone and everyone. And it's warm and homey and sweet and innocent all on the inside.

“...with Jonathan. After my dad left...” Ah. “...but I mean, the Party... well... when it was just Mike and Lucas and Dustin and I... they all added to it. We used to be little enough to have sleepovers in here during the summer.” There’s a wistful tone as Doe Eyes adds, “We haven’t done that in years...”

“Can you imagine trying to do so now?” Richie snorts at the idea of it even as he asks. He knows some of the Party members would be way TOO happy to be in such close quarters.

“It’d definitely be a tight fit.” Doe Eyes concedes with a half sigh.

“For fucking sure...” He mutters. “But you’d enjoy it, huh?” He doesn’t quite need an answer. The answer was in Doe Eyes’ previous wistful tone and the defeated sigh. “What if we continued building on it? Adding to it...so it would fit all of us? You know we can get Dusty to help draw out nerdy ass blueprints. Hell, I can get Haystack to come and lend a hand. He’s a genius at building secret forts. And you know Mikey and Stalker would do whatever you wanted. You’ve got them so wrapped around your little pinkie finger it’s fucking ridiculous and slightly adorable and well, wherever they go, Ellie Belle and Red will follow. And then we could have those summer sleepovers again... all together.”

“Summer sleepovers?!” Dusty’s voice chirps in and interrupts cheerfully. Richie startles at the added voice and glances to the opening of Castle Byers. The sheet hasn’t been disturbed and he can see the shadows of the rest of the Party standing on the other side.

“Dustin, password first.” Richie can hear Mikey hiss. “It just makes it creepy to jump in on a conversation you weren’t a part of.”

“Truth!” Stalker mutters and there’s the sound of palms hitting one another while Dusty grumbles about that being rich, coming from a Telepath. Yet he does say the password and as he does, Doe Eyes pulls his feet from Richie’s chest while he says come in to the rest of the gang. Richie isn’t left contemplating the move and what it means or doesn’t mean exactly because Doe Eyes is suddenly snuggled up, right next to him. He’s sitting up but his hip is bumping against Richie’s head.

There's cool air that sneaks in with the Party members as they all start to crawl in and claim a space of their own.

"So, summer sleepovers?" Dusty asks again, carefully hugging his knees to his chest as he settles in the corner that Doe Eyes had originally been in.

"Yeah, just telling Richie how we used to... in here." Dusty whistles, taking his hat off his head and scratching his forehead with his thumb's knuckle.

"That reminder *really* puts it into perspective how much we've grown." The curly haired teen mutters. "I mean, with the certain bean poles in the group, we don't need the reminder but still." He adds, cheeky grin and fake glare towards Richie and Mikey who give him the middle finger, simultaneously and without prompting in response. That makes Ellie Belle giggle as she takes a hold of Mikey's hand to bring it back to where it'd been resting around her before. The girl is comfortably cuddled against his brother's chest, sitting in his lap.

"I used to go camping with my dad all the time." Red mutters. "I loved it..." Richie tries to half sit up to be able to see all of their faces. They are incredibly cramped in here. And it doesn't surprise him in the slightest to see that Mikey is actually half in and half out, his body blocking the main entrance to the fort with Stalker on his other side. Red is kneeling next to Stalker near Richie's feet and her eyes seem huge as they take in the space around her. It leaves him wondering if this is the first time Red's been here as well.

"Yeah? Where'd you go?" Mikey asks and for a while the entire Party gets lost in talking about different camping and hiking adventures. It's mainly Red and Dusty that supply them what with Red's dad loving to complete several day long hikes and Dusty going to summer camps nearly every year but the others chip in here and there with backyard camping stories and it's clear, despite some misfortunes (*like leaking tents or a random April snow shower or foraging bear getting at the food*) that everyone misses these 'good old times'.

It makes it easy then for Richie to pipe in with his plan.

And that's how the Party Fortress (*Castle Byer's Part II*) comes to be...

7. What Happens After Storytime Ends?

Summary for the Chapter:

What did happen after they ended Storytelling time on the rickety old bus? And what was Hopper's reaction at El not coming home that night? The missing chapter providing those details... :P Enjoy!

Chapter: What Happens After Storytime Ends? (Gift for noDownSide who inspired the chappie)

Missing chappie from Part II

Princess doesn't let go of Mikey's arm the entire walk over. She doesn't split off and head back with Doe Eyes, grip tightening slightly on his twin instead and his twin merely gives a slight head nod of acknowledgment. Richie takes note of it but doesn't say anything. He's actually without words in the moment and his throat is absolutely killing him. It's too dry and it's been way too overworked.

He figures he'll wait for a more opportune time to give his twin the best of his killer wits. Really tease him for this so not stealth mission of sneaking his little girlfriend into their house. So yeah, a part of his brain is already putting some energy into compiling witty banter, a way to break the momentous news to his other friends, the ones who didn't get Storytime tonight (*Its early morning now. Fuck it was late. Late as in, way too many hours had passed where he could have been sleeping. And all he wants is sleep. Fuuuuuck... sleep. Sleep would feel so good.*) And then it hits him, like *really* hits him, and he stalls.

"Wait. Is she sleeping with us?" He hisses. Both Mikey and Princess blink at him with an expression, of duh, numbnuts, where else would she sleep? As if they can't see why the hell that would be awkward. Well, Richie's about to explain *exactly* why, fuckers. Because it is awkward. Epically awkward. And so NOT hilarious and NOT the making of worthwhile teasing material for him to use, if he's

the sad pathetic third wheel in his own fucking room! (*I mean, come on now. It's not like any one from the Losers or the Party would ever buy the idea of a threesome between Mikey-baby, Princess, and himself or honestly anyONE on this planet getting in between the EPIC soulmates that make up his twin and his girlfriend. And him simply thinking it makes him want to shudder. Princess Ellie Belle still gives him the fucking creeps. No thank you. No way. No how. There is NO interest in him either.*) Somehow, Princess sleeping in their room with *them* is WAY different to Richie than Red having a sleep over with the entire gang there.

“Richie...” Mikey starts aloud and then switches to talking in Richie’s head. *It’s late. And we’re tired. We’re just sleeping.* A pause as Mikey surely picks up on some of Richie’s internal rant and tirade on the epic awkwardness that is fast approaching. *Would it really make a difference if we all slept in the basement versus our bedroom?*

Weirdly enough. It does. Also, Richie is singularly grateful that Mikey only caught the tail end of his spiraling thoughts and latched on to the basement as their main sleepover domain versus everything else his brain was (*still is*) forming. He wouldn’t put it quite past Mikey to punch him for the threesome bit. But hey, who knows?

Who the fuck knows...

The three of them change direction quietly and head to the basement and Richie is left contemplating that there’s really no part of his life that isn’t fucking weird these days.

...

El only has strong memories of the basement. They’re mostly fond ones. Like the blanket fort-nest that Mike had made her, the plate of eggos and other food squirreled away to her down there, and the D&D board and pieces to help her explain where Will was. These memories carry a sense of comfort and safety. Of home when she’d never truly known what any of those concepts meant or even ever experienced.

But there’s also the hurt memories. Like Mike’s palpable anger towards her following Will’s fake body being pulled from the

water. Worse even are the memories of being in this space after Mike had gone missing. Those memories just squeeze her heart and fill it with grief.

All of them flit through her mind in stark clear flashes and she can't help but tighten her grip on Mike's arm and hand as she's wrapped both of her arms around his uninjured one. He gently squeezes back, brown eyes glancing at her briefly as they make their way further into the room, none of them bothering to turn the light on.

This is Mike's domain and he knows it by heart. He can lead her through it safely. And apparently, Richie knows it just as well.

El finds that she does indeed have to let Mike go briefly, as he nudges her towards the bathroom with a pair of sweats and a t-shirt to go change into while he and Richie start making some semblance of a fort for them to sleep under. (*Privacy, get it? And she does now, more than she did before...*) It's going to be larger this time around and from what she can tell, as she gives them a last glance before slipping into the bathroom, it's a bit of a hodgepodge of blankets and pillows on the ground with towels and pillow cases covering whatever it is that they're using to make up the "walls".

It brings a small smile on her face even as it tugs at her heart to see the rickety structure come alive in the darkness.

It would have been simpler to just let it be a mess of blankets and pillows on the ground. And probably safer too. But when she steps back out of the bathroom to see their efforts come to life, she can't help but have the original good memories of the basement come bubbling back up in full force.

She's home again.

She takes a step towards them and nearly falls flat on her face because these sweatpants are ridiculously too long. Same with the shirt which despite being a supposedly short sleeve shirt, comes past her elbows...

El snorts a bit as she recovers her balance and grabs bunches

of the sweatpants material to pull up and over her feet before trying again. She thinks she's doing a good enough job being quiet but Richie looks up and snorts at the sight of her.

“...now that's a princess turned pauper look...”

“Pauper?” El asks, tilting her head to the side. Mike is already half in the fort, but he pulls back to glance at both her and Richie before looking back at her again. It's too dark to really be able to read his expression but his tone is fond when he finally speaks.

“It means a poor person, El. He's also playing on the whole fairytale story, the Prince and the Pauper.”

“Oh?” She continues moving forward and then bends so she can crawl in as he holds up one flap of the blanket fortress walls just for her. She has a feeling that the quiet between the three of them is more just that Richie and Mike are talking but that's okay. She's home. She's with him. She can wait. Or maybe, maybe Holly would have this story in one of her many books. Yes. She could look for it tomorrow or another day. Then she'd understand Richie's reference and why Mike's clothes on her make her look like a pauper. She plays with the way the word sounds in her head for a bit.

El settles to the far right, nuzzling the pillow with her nose and cheek before giving a little sigh. She is tired but almost to the point of not being able to fall asleep because of it. Still, it feels nice to finally be laying down and the muscles that had been clenched tight slowly but surely relax, leaving only a slight burning sensation behind.

She feels as Mike and Richie make their own way in finally with Mike coming down and laying beside her, Richie one his other side.

“Don't even...” Mike warns, suddenly speaking aloud and startling her. But he's not talking to her. It's to Richie and Richie must understand because he sighs, as if some great treat is being taken away from him.

“You're no fun.” He mutters but besides that, says nothing

more. Still El finds herself turning, wishing briefly that there was more light in the space so that she could see both of their expressions. She moves closer, tilting her body towards Mike until her forehead touches his shoulder. Once there, she closes her eyes and just breathes him in. This is much better than the Void. So much better.

There's comfort in feeling his warmth seep through the cotton blend of his shirt. There's comfort in hearing his breath and heartbeat. There's comfort even in his smell – a mix of sweat and fresh laundry. He must have changed into a clean set when he'd sent her to do the same.

"Once upon a time, in the ancient city of London..." He starts quietly, bandaged hand coming to find hers, fingers trailing together. "Two families, one poor and one rich, became parents to baby boys..."

El has known she's loved Mike for a very long time now. Has the number of days and minutes etched in her brain, adding to it as another day ends automatically. What she'd never understood until that very moment, is that the love she had for him could still grow. Is growing.

She feels as a smile, faint, tugs at her lips and she leans deeper into him, listening to his deeper voice as he recounts the tale. She feels more of the tension leave. She feels more of the hurt and anger and the fear and confusion and grief, and all the darker emotions leave with the tension. There's more warmth and love and peace and maybe even hope that fill the space instead and also a heaviness that's purely physical exhaustion.

Richie's breathing evens out and slows and the small noises of him restlessly moving eases until it finally stops.

El had been worried she'd been too exhausted to fall asleep just moments before. Now she finds herself fighting sleep, wanting to hold onto each word, each breath Mike takes. She doesn't want to sleep.

No... she really does not want to...

...

Morning finds the three like a pile of puppies. Richie's got an arm thrown across Mike's chest, fingers loosely gripping at his shirt as if it's his security blanket. Besides that, his body's all spread out, one foot even kicked out from the rickety structure of their blanket fort. El's buffeting Mike's other side. She'd moved less in her sleep than Richie had, but she still had moved; and she was now very much with her head on Mike's chest, his heartbeat her lullaby, soothing her and deepening her sleep still. She was still holding onto his hand with both of her own, and the cut that was badly wrapped up last night throbs dully at the pressure. He's going to have to take care of that the second the two wake up and let him go.

Mike's too hot and he'd awoken with a slight start and panic that he was being held down before realizing that no. He'd just become the pillow of several someones. He's not really surprised. Nor is he irritated. It's still not the most comfortable though.

He stays still where he is, simply blinking up and looking at the different light patterns that are playing out in the various towels, pillowcases, sheets, and shirts he and Richie had used as the sun slowly starts to creep up and into the basement. He listens to the way the house wakes up, small creaks and groans as the structure starts to heat up. There's an absence of footsteps and the smell of breakfast being cooked and so he knows they still have a bit of time.

At least on this end. On Hopper's end though? Mike makes a face, not helping the way tension starts to crawl through him once more.

He was going to be in such shit.

Yet the way El wrinkles her nose, hiding her face briefly in his shirt before giving a sleepy sigh... the way it makes him feel to see it, to know she's safe by his side... Mike can honestly say, he doesn't give a fuck.

Let the old man bellow. He can take Hopper's anger on any day.

...

Will is already up and anxiously sketching (*having been shoed out and away from the kitchen by both his brother and mother*) when the phone starts to ring. He knows it's his own nerves speaking because it's not possible, but to him, the ringing phone sounds *pissed off*. He feels his shoulders hike up to his ears and thinks, ah. Hopper's awake.

He hopes his mom won't hiss at him to pick up and instead will throw in the dishtowel that she's been using to... he doesn't actually know what she's been doing. She's trying to help Jonathan, that's probably the only bit that's clear. And it looks like his hopes are going to be dashed as she does *not* in fact stop to pick up the phone and instead starts gesticulating at him to do so instead.

"Will!" She hisses, voice a low but pointed whisper. "Get that before our guests get woken up!" Will gives her a pleading look but drops his pencil dutifully and takes the few steps so he can reach the dreaded, angry sounding phone.

"Byer's residence." He says, hoping his meek polite tone will win him some bonus points.

"Is El there?" No hello, no greeting of any sort. Just a gruff, barely contained panic induced raged tone asking a direct question. Will wilts.

"No, but she's okay, really, I swear. She's with Mike." There's a long pause, a curse and then the phone gets hung up abruptly. Will blinks, mouth slightly open, half wanting to say hello? Just in case. It'd be bad to hang up on Hopper when he's in a rage. But the dial tone ringing in his ear clearly says that that wouldn't be the case at all.

Slowly, hand trembling, he goes to hang up. The second he does, the phone rings again and he jumps at the sound, cursing before picking up again. There's even more dread in him then before. He turns his back to his mom so he doesn't have to see her bewildered and confused expression. So, he doesn't have to see her mouthing the words of 'who is that?' and 'what is going on?' and...

“Hello? Byer’s...” He’s cut off before he can finish.

“The Wheelers, do they know?”

“I’m sorry?” What? Is more his actual question.

“Kid, Do. The. Wheelers. Know?”

“That she’s there...? No... We, we met last night... as a group. There’s more that had to be talked about... about what they experienced.” He starts, faltering but words coming out more quickly, pleading their case. And undoubtedly, his own want to have been right there along with El, not leaving the twins’ sides. “She didn’t want to leave them after that. Please don’t be mad. Please...” He asks, hands gripping the receiver tightly despite his own injury. “She’s the only one who truly gets what they’ve been through.”

There’s a deep heavy sigh on the other end that has his shoulders curling inward with tension.

“Kid, I’m gonna need you to be honest with me now. Like real honest...” Will takes a breath in and holds it. “... your little group, you’re not keeping something from us again, are you?”

Will feels his heart start to hammer, mouth dry, and he actually yells when the phone is yanked from his hands.

“This is Joyce Byers, who are you and what the hell do you want?” She half growls, half barks into the receiver and just like that, his mom’s saved the day again. By half scaring the shit out of him but still. Will takes this moment to go run and hide back into his room. His feet take on an entirely new speed when he hears his mom’s confused... “Hopper?”

A/N - I picture Will using his "guests" as a way to dodge his mother for at least another day or two... Smart Hopper. You know he's gonna be investigating this thoroughly. ;)

8. Types

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike attempts to tease Richie about having a "type". Boy was he NOT expecting the tables to get turned on him! But then again, Richie is his twin. He should have known better. Don't you think?

Chapter: Types

Missing chappie from Part II or in between Part II and part III

"So..." Richie arches an eyebrow at the gleeful little tone residing in his brother's voice. He sits up, thinking whatever is about to come out of his brother's mouth is going to be a good one. One that shows, even more than their shared look, that they've inherited the same DNA 100%. "You've certainly got a type." Richie blinks. And blinks again.

"Really?" He huffs a sigh and falls back on his bed. "Cause that's the biggest news today? I've got a fucking type?" He snorts and rubs at his eyes under his glasses before smirking at his brother. He's not sure he's in a space where he can take the teasing about his past and current crushes. But that's okay, cause he knows exactly how to turn the tables. Regain the advantage. And so he opens his mouth and says it. "I'd say we share that type, Mikey-baby."

The (*annoyingly*) superior teasing shit eating grin on Mikey's face freezes for a moment as Mikey simply looks back at him confused.

"Oh come on, Mikey, I know you're smarter than this. Need me to spell it out for you?" Richie rolls to his side so that he has an easier time watching his brother's face. He wants to see it when it clicks. "Brunettes, huge brown-hazel eyes that look right into your soul, petite frames but you know they can kick your ass right back to the curb because they're actually feisty as all get out, able to keep our

egos in check...Ring a bell?" He adds for good measure. "Sound familiar at all, dipshit?"

"What?" Mikey starts. "What are you getting at..?! Wait..." And there it is. There's the moment where it clicks and it's Richie's turn to smirk.

"Don't fight it Mikey-baby. It's all in our genetics after all. You can ask Dusty for all the research on the topic..."

"... what? No! Just no!"

...

Richie will never explain to Doe Eyes or Princess or Eds for that matter why weeks later, Mikey still gets a weirded-out expression on his face when he sees the two or all three of them together. Richie simply cackles and feels pride in that he *totally* got the upper hand on Mikey that time around. Richie 562, Mikey 547 (*and yes, he totally keeps a mental tally and NO he's not biased at all!*). Take that bitches! He was not at all losing his touch. Nope, uh-uh, no sir. And damn, did it feel good.

A/N - Super short scene that made me laugh and thought I'd post as I work to finalize the next chapter for "The Other Side". I'm sorry it's been so long since I posted or even responded to comments. There's no excuse beyond life and work has been busy and draining on so many levels. I know I'm not alone in experiencing this and so I hope that you all are taking care of yourselves the way you need to. Just know, I have not forgotten about this story or given up on it. I'm still planning on writing the story till the very end and have several chapters already half written for Part III (99 Red Balloons). Will be posting that update to the "Other Side" soon!

9. Of Nail Polish and Pencil Sketches

Chapter: Of Nail Polish and Pencil Sketches

Missing chappie that occurs between Part II and Part III

Richie is trying his best to sit still. He really is but he can't help the way one foot taps out to the rhythm of the song blasting from Mikey and his radio. He can't help but continue glancing sporadically around the room trying to find something to capture his attention and settle the manic energy running through his body that's been yelling at him to move, move, move!

It's his fault he knows. Him and his big mouth. But also, a bit of Holly's fault too. She's too cute and her big eyes are way too convincing, especially when she'd jutted out her bottom lip in what he supposes was a puppy pout. It's hella convincing and he's got a sinking feeling that when she ever gets to the *proper* age to date, he and Mikey are gonna have to beat boys off of her with more than just a stick. The thought makes him wrinkle his nose.

What the fuckity fuck is happening to him? Living at the Wheelers' has definitely warped him. He's gone completely and utterly down the river named Sap. God, he's fucked. Seriously though, he should be less worried about protecting his little cousin's virtue in the future and more worried about himself (*in that his virtue is still completely and utterly intact and he really really needed to up his game if he didn't want to die a virgin*)!

But yeah, what the hell had he been blabbering about in his head? Oh right, why he's convinced that even though it's mainly his fault he's in the situation he's in currently, it's also Holly's too.

Damn that pout!

He tries not to yank his one hand away as the small brush that the five year old is wielding goes beyond his badly bitten nail and onto the now exposed and sensitive skin. It tickles. He bites the

inside of his cheek and then blows the air out of his mouth in one loud gush. It causes Holly's short blond strands that have long fallen loose from her hair ties to fly wildly about.

Holly makes a bit of a noise, clucking at him in what he supposes is a fair imitation of Aunt Karen gently scolding.

"Don't move Riiiiichie!" She tacks on after the clucking and Richie can hear Mikey nearby snort in amusement.

"Yeah, don't move, Richie." His twin, the fucking dipshit, mutters, tone a little too gleeful. Mikey's definitely the smarter twin, he muses internally, only mildly irritated. *He's* comfortable where he sits, reading through a comic, only periodically looking up to see how Richie and Holly are faring with a little smirk on his face that's kept Richie from moving *too* much or too often anyway.

"Fuck the shut up, Mikey-baby." He returns lightly and the little girl stops mid-motion and glances at him with huge baby blue eyes.

"Richie!" She nearly squeals and places her free hand on his mouth. "Language." It's fucking cute and fucking irritating too. Being reprimanded by a fucking five year old.

"But he's annoying meeeee kiddo. A man's gotta retaliate any way he can and you're not letting me move!" He manages to whine despite the little fingers poking at his lips. The movement apparently is now tickling her and she laughs at him, little nose wrinkling just a bit.

"I'll be done soon-soon! Promise!" And with that, the little girl dips her little brush back in the bottle of nail polish and Richie can't help but wince a little at the colors that are now spread on more than half of his fingernails.

"You are so making me out to be hella gay, short stuff."

"Richie..." Mikey's tone is a clear, *shut it*, as his twin gets up and slaps the comic book he'd been reading on top of Richie's head. Rather hard. Oooh that fucker. Just wait until Richie's let loose and

freed from this... *manicure*.

“Gay? What’s that mean? Pretty?” Holly asks, not at all bothered as her little tongue sticks out just a bit as she goes back to concentrating on her artwork. She’d declared earlier on that Richie’s nails needed to match his bracelet. The first she’d ever made him that is. Richie would have preferred an all black look to his nails to be honest but that was seemingly the only color the munchkin didn’t own.

“Sure. Real pretty.” Richie heaves a sigh and rolls his eyes at the look Mikey’s giving him. His one hand’s done. So this should be okay, right? Sure, short stuff had told him it needed to dry but surely by now, it had to be dry, right? In any case, he expertly moves his hand and gives Mikey *the* finger. “But actually, if we wanna be all boringly technical about it, it means happy or fun in French.” He adds, giving his brother a challenging look. A definite, fight me, mama’s boy. You know I’m right, look.

“Oh.” She nods at that and glances back at him happily. “That’s good. I want you to be pretty AND happy and having fun.”

“What’s going on here...?”

...

Will pokes his head into the twin’s room after having been told where he’d find them. He hadn’t quite known what to expect. All he knows is, it wasn’t this. He can’t help but lean into the doorway and watch for a bit.

Richie’s lanky form is in the most awkward – almost broken – looking position. The upper half of his body is on the bed, one hand waving his middle finger in the air in Mike’s general direction while the other is being held still by Holly. The rest of Richie’s body is in a weird sit-squat on the floor, one leg waving to a beat that Will isn’t sure is keeping the current tempo of the song blasting in the room. It’s almost like an angry cat’s tail, lashing out and the mental image of the twins as cats suddenly makes Will laugh inside just a bit.

The youngest of the Wheelers is all curled up on the bed,

head low as she inspects the work she's doing and Will finds his amusement growing as he realizes that Holly is painting Richie's nails. In very bright colors. She has several little bottles of the different colors strewn about Richie's bed. Will can already see that the green, the red, the yellow, blue, and the pink have already been used on the first hand. It looks like she's working through the orange and that next, she'll move onto some purple. If he's making sense of her organized chaos, that is and he's not one hundred percent confident that he is.

Mike is watching the two of them, standing and looking mildly unimpressed at the middle finger and probably, knowing his best friend the way he does, the language being used around his little cousin. Still his entire body screams of being also incredibly fond at the two who are in front of him. It shows in the way that he's completely relaxed, no tension to be found in the tall lanky body.

Will is quite sure all three of them are too in tune with one another to realize they have an audience and so he's just a little startled when he realizes that Mike's dark eyes are looking at him and that his friend gives him a little jerk of the head in greeting. There's a look on his face that goes from unimpressed to clearly asking Will, can you believe this? There's a slight roll of the eyes and a smile on Mike's face that lights up his entire face.

Will straightens out where he stands, amused affection burning up inside of him. It's these little moments that he wishes he could continually collect. He doesn't have Jonathan's gift in photography. But maybe, maybe...

There's a sudden itch to sketch the moment down. Maybe Mike still has one of his many old sketchbooks hidden around here. He'd like that, if he could sketch the scene in front of him. Join without truly joining or disrupting the playful warmth of an ordinary moment. Capture Richie and Mike in their element, with their littlest cousin and really, honestly, being the best brothers a kid could ask for.

But in order to do that...

"What's going on here...?" He asks softly, smile playing on

his lips. He chuckles just a bit when both Richie and Holly jump up, startled at a new voice joining their own. "You've got... what did you say? Happy nails?"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me, cutie pie," Richie mutters, his only free hand suddenly grasping at his t-shirt right over his heart. "You gave me a fucking heart atta-mph..."

"Language, language!" Holly sings, eyes wide, both hands going to cover Richie's mouth. She's in such a state to stop Richie from cursing more and possibly getting in trouble now that he's back that she doesn't pay attention to the little brush and the way it's now smearing nail polish all over his high cheekbone. Will laughs outright and Mike can't help but join him. Richie's eyebrows have shot up super high, so high they're for once clearly seen above his thick glass frames.

"You tell him Hols," Mike chortles. "And continue painting his face as you do... he'll look really pretty then." The little girl notices what she's done and gives a cute little shriek, hands moving away from Richie's mouth to suddenly rubbing Richie's cheek. It's clear that she's hoping to get the nail polish off the pale skin. She does get most of it off (*uses her own spit and thumb despite Richie's squawking protests that she ignores in a way that again fully mirrors her mother to a T*) but there's still a bit of glimmer there. And redness from the rubbing.

"You're lucky you're cute." Richie mutters to the kid, hiding his face in his upper arm as she decides she's done the best she could to salvage his cheek and now, she really should be returning to finishing his fingers.

In the midst of the (*slight*) chaos that had temporarily erupted, Will has been able to get settled on Mike's bed, back supported by the wall. Mike had read him easily enough, whether just by looking at him or by his powers, Will doesn't know. But he has indeed read him because Will has a hard cover book resting on his knees and a stack of unlined loose-leaf papers next to him. It's not quite as good as a sketchbook but it's better than a regular school notebook.

He smiles to himself again as he peeks over his knees and looks out at the scene again.

Mike's back to reading on the other end of his bed, closer to his twin and cousin, eyes glancing up here and again to simply take the pulse of the room. His amused smirk is still there and only grows at seeing how Richie continues to hide his face.

Will watches as Mike reaches over to simply fluff his twin's growing locks gently. *That* makes Richie let loose a sound that's a mix between a huff and a snort. Maybe would have been a word that got censored and lost into an indecipherable sort of sound instead. But it does make Richie tilt his head just so that Will can see his expression now.

Irritated pout.

Will would bet money though that the irritation is feigned. It melts too quickly off his face as his eyes simply look back at Holly and the way she's concentrating. She's singing softly under her breath and it really is... just super adorable.

Will gets the tingling sensation in his fingers again and stops fighting it. He gets lost in drawing, trying to capture the scene, and in doing so, forgets that he's become part of the scene.

It's only when he looks up because something in his drawing is off (*the way Richie can contort his body is really fucking hard to capture*), that he's startled, and his heart gives a funny lurch at realizing that Richie's watching him. The expression on Richie's face is a bit hard to describe.

Like he's lost in thought. Yet utterly relaxed. Searching maybe? Fond. Then caught and there's a tinge of a blush that hits his cheeks.

Mike snorts and Will's eyes move to him, missing how Richie's blush gets darker and his eyes squint into a glare.

Will is left utterly perplexed as to what Richie did to get smacked by a comic book but he does, and Mike doesn't explain. Just

moves away slightly to not get smacked right back in retaliation.

The rest of their afternoon continues to have that warm, relaxed undercurrent despite the fact that some chaos does erupt when the rest of the gang surely makes their way over with both El and Max complimenting Holly's work and agreeing to be her next canvasses and Lucas looking slightly worried, he's going to be asked to get his nails painted too (*After all, he's a big brother and he knows how this works. Erica had definitely used him and/or his toys to practice*). That leads to a history lesson from Dustin about make-up and masculinity and the changing trends through the years that well... you can guess, can't you? Richie tries to interrupt and tease his friend about the lecture and it all gets rowdy and loud but it's happy.

Will can't quite capture it all, but he does get a few scenes sketched out that he thinks are good enough. Still, his favorite will be the first one of that day and he can't help but smile as he glances at it again later that night. Yeah, the warmth is there alright and he's just grateful that he'll always have this to remind him of that moment.

A/N - Hello! I wanted a moment of cuteness and happiness for our boys and this is what came of it. I hope you all enjoy and that you're all safe and sound. <3

10. Operation - Checking in on You

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie's a touchy-feely kinda guy. Dustin worries that Richie's nature may cause friction between Max and Lucas and checks in... cause that's what friends do.

Chapter: Operation – Checking in On You...

Missing chappie that occurs between Part II and Part III

“Does it ever bother you?” The question is left hanging unfinished in the air and Lucas blinks at Dustin for a couple of minutes because he’s that fucking confused. His curly haired friend simply jerks his chin to the right and Lucas turns to see what could possibly be bothering him there. All he sees is Max, Richie and Will right where they’d left them to start making their way to the nearest home to grab some snacks and drinks. El and Mike are somewhere, no doubt close, but taking some alone time while they can get it. Not that it had ever been easy to separate them *before* per se, but since the kidnapping and then the trip to Florida, the soulmates truly had become inseparable. None of them had wanted to go back in to deal with the adults and so they’d voted (*more like played rock, paper, scissors*) on who would sneak in and sneak back out with the promised goods, the golden couple excluded from the duel since they’d already wandered off from the group some minutes before, looking utterly and hopelessly (*disgustingly according to Richie*) sappy and lost in their own little world.

Lucas frowns and looks at Dustin. He’s still confused. “What... that we picked the short straw? No...” After all, they’d lost fair and square. It’s now Dustin’s turn to blink confusedly.

“What? No. Just, no...God you’re obtuse sometimes.”

“You’re obtuse. Jerk.” Lucas mutters, giving his friend a shove. “Just ask what you fucking want to ask instead of being all mysterious about it.” That gets him a bit of a glare.

“Fiiiine...” There’s a sigh and Dustin gives another quick look behind him before shrugging. “Does it ever bother you that Richie’s so... touchy-feely with Max?” The question does take Lucas aback and he finds himself looking backwards briefly. The three that are still sitting in the remains of Byer’s castle are chatting happily and clueless. It’s true that Richie’s currently using Max’s lap as his pillow, long thin arms waving in the air to demonstrate who knows what.

“He’s a touchy-feely kinda guy.” Lucas mutters after a bit, scratching the back of his neck. “I mean, he uses Mike’s and Will’s lap pretty much for his pillow just as much as he does Max’s. Hell, he’s just touchy and feely with pretty much all of us.” He adds after he remembers one particularly enthusiastic hug he’d gotten just hours earlier by the lanky teen.

“That’s true...” Dustin mutters with a slight nod of the head. “So it doesn’t bother you.”

“Not really.” Lucas responds giving his friend a side look. “Does it bother you?” There’s a drawn out pause and Lucas knows that Dustin is considering the question seriously. Most likely he’s even checking in with himself to figure out what exactly had pushed him to ask the question in the first place.

“No... I guess not.” He finally breaks the silence. “As long as it doesn’t bother you or cause tension between you and Max, I’m good.” Huh. Apparently, it’s just going to be one of those Dustin surprises Lucas days. He gives his friend a gentle nudge in thanks now that it’s clear that Dustin’s just been looking out for him.

“Thanks man.” Dustin arches an eyebrow at him for the nudge and the verbalized gratitude. For a handful of minutes, the two of them are content in letting the matter drop completely. It’s Lucas who brings it back up and starts the conversation again. Because his brain will just *not* let this go. Why doesn’t it bother him? Should it bother him? Again, his gut is telling him *no*. So, he tries explaining it out loud, putting it into words so that the gut feeling can be made clear to both himself and Dustin.

“I think it doesn’t bother me because I know that it’s not specific to Max. And...I also know what’s behind it.”

“What do you mean?” Lucas hesitates then. He knew bringing the topic back up would mean sharing more because Dustin’s curiosity is never sated. Not ever. Not in all the years that they’ve known each other has Dustin ever said no to wanting to know more. So, he’d known it was opening a door and one he wasn’t sure he was allowed to open all on his own.

And at the same time... it felt weird knowing things about the twins that wasn’t being openly talked about with the entire group. He wasn’t even sure how he felt knowing the information. Especially since it hadn’t come directly from Richie or Mike. Not really.

The twins had shared just enough of their nearly yearlong experience with Dr. Brenner for everyone to know what had led them to be who they were now. But it had been general and definitely a PG, watered down version of their true experience. The twins had never shared the details of their day-to-day experience during the time they’d been “missing” and experimented on and Lucas had never asked for them. It seemed invasive and somewhat cruel to put the twins in a position of having to choose between sharing or not sharing.

He also knows that Will and El and Max were the ones to push for details, or make space for them, and that they’d be better at handling them, if they were ever shared. He also knew that Dustin probably had pushed for the details as well but that had everything to do with Dustin’s need for knowledge and scientific curiosity. It’s not like his friend didn’t care or couldn’t be sensitive. He could be and often was but... Lucas shakes his head. He’s getting off track here.

Richie apparently had been more open to sharing than Mike had been. Lucas hadn’t been surprised in some ways. Just been surprised that Max had shared the little bits and pieces with him. He’d stored them away, vowing to wait for Mike to share with him directly if he ever thought it was necessary to do so. Until then, he didn’t really know what to do with the information.

“...Just you remember how El shared what she’d gone through and that it may be what Richie and Mike would be going

through if they were indeed with Brenner?" Lucas starts, compromising with himself that he would share just enough for Dustin to understand.

"Yeah..."

"Richie basically confirmed it with Max. He and Mike were regularly punished by being placed in isolation for days at a time..." Dustin makes a face. Not surprised. But one that definitely shows he doesn't like the information. Is a little sickened by it even.

Lucas gets it. He'd had a stomachache the rest of the day and a couple days after whenever he saw the twins after Max had shared it with him. "... he said what got him through the punishments was imagining being with all of us... the Losers too and that Mike helped him make it more real when he got strong enough to do so." He adds softly, hands unconsciously clenching into fists. "Max said... I think sometimes, it still feels unreal and... touching us... makes it feel more real. It's comforting to him and...I guess, that's why it doesn't bother me at all." Lucas feels like he should add more but doesn't know what exactly and so after a couple false starts, he simply lapses into silence. He finds himself glancing at his friend from time to time, studying the expression on Dustin's face. He's surprised by the uncharacteristic quiet that has fallen between them as he'd been expecting follow-up questions. He's less surprised by the expression that tells him that Dustin's thinking and thinking about something *hard*.

Lucas internally sighs, going back to doubting whether he should have shared what he did and wondering whether he needs to do *something* to snap Dustin out of the quiet before they get back to the gang. Because if Dustin doesn't do it himself, Mike wouldn't need his telepathy to realize something is off. The whole gang would be able to tell!

He's about to both verbally and physically give Dustin a little shove to spit out whatever he's thinking or trying to solve when Dustin just starts rambling a bit randomly about his newest project. Something about a radio antenna and it's just such a hard left turn that Lucas can only blink at his friend. He misses half of the plan as his brain tries to rapidly play catch up to the new topic that he

actually has to get Dustin to repeat himself once... maybe two times.

They continue on the safer topic long after they've gotten the food and are making their way back to the gang. They get teased by Max and Richie when the two can actually be overheard and Dustin seems to fall easily into the pattern of aggrieved exasperation while still trying to make whatever point he often tries (*and fails*) to make with them. Lucas watches and observes, finding that Mike is doing something similar. El on the other hand seems quite lost by the entire conversation and honestly, is more interested in the food as she starts to divide the goods evenly amongst the group. Will looks amused by all of them. It's just back to being a typical moment with the Party and the tension that resided in Lucas' stomach slowly starts to melt away.

Tbc... Sorry this is just a short random scene. It'd been playing in the back of my head for quite awhile but there never seemed to be a good moment to introduce it in "The Other Side" so, here is it... making its debut in "The In Between". I hope you enjoy it and I hope you're all doing well, staying safe, healthy, and warm. I'm currently hiding from the snow and enjoying a snow day off of work. :P

11. Parenting Woes

Summary for the Chapter:

A small chappie to follow the ending of The Other Side - where Karen seeks support from the only other parents who could possibly understand her personal woes. After all, its not like there's a lot of people in Hawkins (or the rest of the world) who have to deal with psychic children...

Chapter: Parenting Woes

Missing chappie from after Part II concludes

To say that Joyce is surprised to see Karen staring back at her when she opens her front door is putting it mildly. It's not that she never sees Karen. But the number of times that they would meet or that Karen would actually come visit her since the boys had reached adolescence, well, she could count those on one hand. And that included the time when Will had disappeared, and Karen had wanted to offer support.

Karen gives her a crooked smile as if she knows exactly what Joyce is thinking. She holds up the bottle of wine she's carrying.

"I come with gifts?" She offers. Joyce continues to blink at her, confused, before opening her door wider and stepping back. Wine is definitely a better gift than the casserole she'd brought at her last visit to her home.

"Come on in..."

"Thank you," Karen says, tone hushed. It's her turn to stop, surprised, when she sees that Joyce isn't alone and that Hopper is here too, nursing a beer at the kitchen table. He greets her by tipping his beer in her direction.

"Hiya," He grunts the word out before taking a long swig.

Karen hesitates where she stands, feeling like she's distinctly interrupting something and so she looks between the two. If Joyce understands the wordless question Karen's trying to ask, she ignores it in favor of closing the door and ushering her to come deeper into the kitchen.

Joyce is quiet as she pulls out two wine glasses from her cupboards, ignoring the half drunken beer bottle that's hers on the table. Once the task is done though and Karen wordlessly offers her the wine bottle, Joyce starts the conversation, reminding Karen exactly why she had come in the first place. Karen watches as Joyce opens the wine bottle and pours out two glasses of wine. She doesn't even bother offering a glass to Hopper, who instead co-opts Joyce's unfinished beer for himself.

"Is everything okay Karen?"

Karen sighs at the question, taking the chair that Hopper has so helpfully kicked out in her direction and nearly falls into it, her polished posture totally gone as she does.

"How do you do it?" Both Hopper and Joyce blink, looking mystified. Karen doesn't give them the time to ask what the hell she's talking about before she continues. "How do you parent them when they can just..." She makes a motion that's a flick of her hand and a frowny face that Joyce supposes is meant to illustrate the twins concentrating in order to use their powers. It looks comical on Karen's usually composed and perfectly made-up face. She has to take a large swallow of the wine to keep from laughing. Hopper is less polite and laughs outright, although the sound is just slightly tired.

"Believe me, until you've had your kid nearly explode your house up in a temper tantrum, you've seen nothing yet." Karen looks a bit affronted by that assessment.

"I don't know about that," She counters. Joyce feels her amusement grow as she listens to Karen and Hopper's back and forth, each trying to best the other regarding their parenting woes.

Karen talks about being knocked out by Mike and of the time Ted pissed Richie off so much that her curtains spontaneously burst

into flames to name just a handful of examples. Those are by far the worst and possibly the scariest. However, she also moans about the times (*more numerous by far*) when it's clear the twins are communicating telepathically about something she's said or done. And to think she'd thought that Nancy leaving the house in the middle of the night via rooftop had given her gray hairs.

Hopper retaliates that telepathy has *nothing* on telekinesis (*Joyce notices the omission of pyrokinesis in the statement and snorts in her wine glass. It amuses her to no end that Karen had come to her for support around this. She's also enjoying the perfect timing that Hopper had come to gripe at her about parenting issues too. Though his woes had been more normal in the beginning. Afterall, teenagers were a lot to deal with on a regular day*). He describes in more detail some of El's "temper tantrums" and the amount of times he's had to repair doors and windows since she's moved in. He also doesn't hide the fact that more often than not, the cause of their fights revolves around El's relationship with Mike. Hopper makes it clear that he thinks the teens are moving too fast and Joyce finds herself rolling her eyes at the both of them when they seem to agree on this topic.

Personally, she finds the couple adorable.

...

And thus, starts the newest tradition. Full of wine, beer, and exchanges of parenting woes that takes place at the very least one time a week. It's a support group of sorts and one very dearly needed. Afterall, what parent in the world doesn't need someone else going through the same ups and downs, joys and fears, to help calm and reassure that your best is good enough and when it's not, well, they'll at least be there to rally around you to share their own fuck ups. Karen, Hopper, and Joyce aren't alone and that in itself, is reassuring.

12. Anniversaries, Nightmares, and Dream Catchers... Oh My...

Summary for the Chapter:

A missing chapter from after Part II concludes that shows what happens when Will has a nightmare, Mike feels it, and wakes Richie to deal with it, cause he's an awesome brother like that. ;)

Chapter: Anniversaries, Nightmares, and Dream Catchers...Oh My...

Missing chappier from after Part II concludes

Richie is shocked awake by the (*violently*) thrown pillow that smacks him in the face. He sits up right quickly, hands shoving the soft plushy thing away from him and blinks in the darkness.

“...the fuck?!” He can’t see for shit without his glasses and the darkness doesn’t exactly help. He can hear though and Mikey is definitely yawning and moving around in the neighboring bed. “Poltergeist. Mikey-baby... poltergeists in the room trying to have a pillow fight with me.” (*Because that makes so much more sense than Mikey suddenly trying to pick a fight.*)

“...God shut up!” Mikey hisses, long arms reaching to scoop back up his pillow from the floor. “Will just had a seriously bad nightmare. I figured you’d want to know.”

“What...?” It’s too late for this kinda shit. Mikey should know better. His brain is free firing and all the rest and relaxation that it’d been enjoying in sweet, sweet oblivion is now gone. His entire body is still trembling with the *fucking* rude wake-up call and his heart seizes at Doe Eyes’ name being spoken but it doesn’t mean that everything clicks into place. Not by a long shot. It doesn’t help him understand the situation better when Mikey continues talking with short, abrupt sentences.

(Later, much later, when the cold Fall air is biting at his face as he bikes his way from the Wheeler residence to the Byers', he'll realize that Mikey's curtness are all signs pointing to the fact that he'd been pulled into Doe Eyes' nightmare accidentally and is most likely sporting the biggest migraine and nose bleed to boot. These powers are a curse, Man. Fucking hell... If Brenner hadn't already bitten it and been cremated, the things Richie would do to that piece of shit.)

"Just... go get him."

"Fucking Christ on a cracker... what?" Quickly followed with, "And why the hell should I do that... it's... god knows what time it is. But it's *nighttime* and I was fucking sleeping, asshole. You go." His mouth is on automatic even though he's already getting up, shaking the blankets from the rest of his body and his hands are searching the nightstand table for his glasses.

"Uh huh... I'm not the one calling him *cutie-pie* and getting flustered by his *Bambi* eyes or whatever the fuck it is that you call him in your head." Mikey grouches, arm slung over his face hiding his eyes and nose. Richie has a moment where the impulse to shove his brother off the bed is so very strong that he trips over his own *fucking* foot. He is not tripping because of the words. No. Not at all. Fuck this. Fuck telepathy. Fuck twin brothers with said telepathy and empathic powers. Life was fucking unfair.

"Oh fuck you." He still has to say it out loud even though he's pretty sure Mikey's already heard his litany of curses. He'd made it a point to *think* them his way after all.

"Already taken..." Mikey mutters. "Let me know when you get there, k? And be careful... it's literally the anniversary of when it *all* started."

Fuck, fuck, fuck *FUCK*... how'd he forget that?!

Richie doesn't bother changing and just barely remembers that if he's biking to the Byers' household, shoes might be nice.

...

Will is sitting on the steps just outside his front door, shivering in his light cotton pajama set. He knows being outside isn't going to help him shake off the nightmare (*if he's being honest with himself, he'd use the word flashback to describe what it was, but he can't... not just yet. Maybe not ever*). Especially not with the way the cool night air is nipping at his skin and causing goosebumps to rise all over. The cold bothers him so much more now.

Still, his room – his bed – had left him feeling claustrophobic. Even his own skin and body feel too small, too tight...just wrong right now. He knows nothing is actually wrong. He knows that it's just because of the nightmare, because of the anniversary date, and the PTSD.

All of it is to be expected.

And only time will make it better.

He's heard the company line before. He's also felt the real repercussions when the company line had been way off the mark. Still, Will knows it's different this time. It truly is just a *nightmare*. A resurgence of the trauma symptoms brought upon with the weather changing.

Since his possession, Will feels the cold that much more strongly and it always brings him back to the Upside Down... and worse to the powerless and helpless sensation of the Mind Flayer invading him.

(He likes it cold. He doesn't like it hot.)

Will leans back, letting the wall of the house support his weight. He's watching the clear sky, trying to take comfort in the fact that it's the normal color and that stars are shining brightly up above. There's no red flashing. There's no weird decay and other debris falling through the air.

Heads up... Mike's mental voice is tired sounding but warm and caring. *Richie's on his way over to you. Don't shoot him, please.*

It's a one-way communication though because Will isn't in

the Void or in the In Between and yeah, he may be an *Empath* with a hint of Telekinesis, but that's all he is. And with the distance between himself and his friend, even trying to *think* at Mike is going to do nothing. So, Will's just left in surprised confusion at the interruption and warning. It forces him to get up though and he starts to walk carefully down his driveway, ignoring the way the stones and branches and leaves stick to the more tender parts of his bare feet.

Richie comes into view quickly enough and Will stops where he is, taking in the sight of his friend pedaling towards him. His curly hair is seriously ruffled and his glasses seem a little lopsided on that long freckled nose. As if they'd been pushed onto his face in a rush. He's still in what obviously is his own sleepwear – a wrinkled black t-shirt with flannel bottoms. The only thing that truly looks out of place though are his untied sneakers without socks to protect his bony ankles.

“Cutie-pie!” The nickname is cried out in a fake whisper as Richie slows down and comes to a stop right in front of him. “Fuck it's cold out here. What the hell are you doing outside barefooted anyway? Come on... hop on.”

“Richie...” Will starts carefully, still trying to make sense of why Richie is even here, in front of him. Yet his body moves for him, carefully sliding onto the back of Richie's bike. “What are you doing here?”

“Taxi service and human shaped dream catcher all at the lowest price for you, cutie, any time, any day, anywhere.” Despite Richie's earlier proclamation that it's cold out here, Will finds that the teen is anything but. Must be the pyrokinetic power at work or something because Richie remains hot to the touch as Will winds his arms loosely around his waist in order to stay firmly balanced on the bike. “Where to, lovey? Wheeler kingdom or back home?”

“...I don't understand...”

“Blame Mikey.” Richie mutters, grumble only half feigned. “He said you had a bad nightmare and that you might like the company. And it must have been one hell of a nightmare with the way he woke me up.” Richie takes a quick pause but not one that's

long enough for Will to say or do anything beyond take the information in, including the way that Richie's grumbling tone changes to one of quiet concern. Even the flirty tone that had been present at the very beginning fading away to reveal more of Richie's serious side. "What would help right now? Like, is it better to go home or go back to our place? Cause I can make both happen just like that..."

"..." Will closes his eyes for a moment, pressing his face into Richie's back. He knows that if he only had to worry about himself, he wouldn't hesitate in giving his answer. He wants to be as far away from his house as he possibly can be. And Mike and Richie always make him feel safe. There's nothing better than being around the two of them. But... he isn't alone. His mother is sleeping at home, oblivious to where he is and how he's feeling. If she knew...

He can't put her through more than he already has. After all, it's not just his nightmare of an anniversary. It's hers too...

"Take me home, Richie." He mumbles the words out, arms tightening their hold briefly.

"Aye, aye mon capitaine..." Richie huffs, the French accent rolling off his tongue smoothly before he pushes off and gets them going in the right direction.

"Will you tell Mike?" He asks as they near the house.

"Already done, sweetheart. Don't you worry about a thing." And the weird thing is...with the twins, since they've been back, he rarely does worry about a thing (*besides worrying that Mike is overdoing it and not being completely honest with them in order to protect them. Thank god the blood oath was now in place*). They've all survived so much against all odds and just... it's hard to put into words. Maybe the sheer gratitude that they'd managed to pull through again, that the twins had come back to them... it made everything better when he was with them. Made everything else seem smaller and less important in some ways.

Richie stays on the bike a smidgeon longer once they arrive, letting Will slide off first before finally hopping off and letting the

bike fall to its side. Will bites off a half smile half sigh, knowing that if Mike or even Dustin had been around to witness the bike's abuse, there would be words being shared vehemently at the moment. But they aren't here and the only sound remains the turning of the bike wheel and Richie making a brr... it's cold sorta sound. It's the sound that pushes Will to move again.

They make their way into the house and back into his bedroom quietly. Will doesn't directly go about trying to find his old sleeping bag to make Richie a makeshift bed on his bedroom floor. He simply looks at his friend who raises a questioning eyebrow at him that quickly dissolves into waggling eyebrows. Will rolls his eyes but smiles and simply points to his bed.

"You're okay sharing?"

"Fuck yeah, better than the floor." And with that, Richie's making himself comfortable under the blankets. He even ends up patting the free space next to him in a silent invite. As if it's not Will's bed and the roles should be reversed but aren't. Will follows though, not sure if he actually wants to go back to bed but he can't also stay outside and it'd be pretty fucking rude to keep Richie up simply because he doesn't want to go back to sleep. "Did you want to talk...?" Richie murmurs as Will tries to settle himself in a comfortable position without letting himself think about how odd this all is.

Richie doesn't push though when Will simply shakes his head no and allows himself to be gently nudged around until they find a way for both of them to be on the bed and comfortable. It's a bit of a tight space but as Richie mutters in Will's ear, he's used to sharing. It's comforting to hear his low voice talk quietly about how he's dealt (*is still dealing*) with his own share of nightmares and how Mike had handled them in the past. Maybe comforting isn't the right word.

Normalizing maybe?

Will no longer feels alone. No longer feels weak and trapped. And as Richie's words start to taper off, Will realizes something else.

He finally feels warm, with Richie wrapped around him like

the human equivalent of a blanket right along with Will's actual blanket that's draped around both of them. It should have felt more claustrophobic than before with the added weight, the added space being taken away from him. But there's something soothing about the way Richie's hands are tapping out a slow rhythm on his abdomen where they rest, loosely clasped together. It's also soothing to feel the constant in and out of Richie's breathing which is literally forcing Will's to slowly but surely match it until their breathing patterns fit together. He can feel Richie's heartbeat slowing as his friend starts to fall asleep behind him. Even the way Richie's face starts to nudge into his shoulder feels weirdly comforting.

And so, yeah, it's no longer claustrophobic being here.

It's grounding.

Will fights sleep for a moment longer before surrendering to it, one hand going to rest where Richie's lay.

A/N - Hello, hope you all are staying warm and safe if you're currently live in a place that has winter seasons. I know certain states have been getting hit quite hard and my heart go out to you all. Please take care and I hope you all enjoy this little chappie.

13. Pining's a Bitch

Summary for the Chapter:

The chapter title says it all, in Richie's words, pinning's a bitch and telepathic brothers who know you are pinning aren't helpful. But maybe it's not so bad. I mean, what if the object of your affection does indeed return your feelings?

Chapter: Pining's a Bitch.

Missing chappie from after Part II concludes

"You should tell him." Mikey shares his ever so *unhelpful* and *unasked* for advice. Richie levels him a glare that should be quite clear in his views and could his brother shut up please? It's not like they were alone.

The whole fucking Party is around them. Granted they aren't in hearing distance as the entire group was scattered doing god knows what but still.

"Seriously Richie," Mikey mutters, brushing his hands free from crumbs of the lunch they'd just finished inhaling. "The whole pinning bit was one thing when we were jailed and didn't have a way out or really a way to communicate with them. But we've been free for nearly a year now and the pinning thing's just gotten... old."

"Well then stop listening in, fucker." Richie throws his sandwich wrapper at Mikey's head and it's a beautiful throw. Hits dead center and Mikey makes a bitch face that's worth millions if only it wasn't so overly used. And it is. Overly used that is.

"Richie..."

"Beep beep Mikey!!"

"I don't need to be fucking beeped!" Mikey yells, shoving at

Richie's shoulder hard. "Sides, that only works on you!" The yelling calls the rest of the group to attention and Richie has to think hard and fast to confuse and throw them off the scent of what Mikey and he had actually been talking about. He ignores how El gives him the side eye that shows she isn't put off at all and will most likely poke it out of Mikey later.

Stupid soulmates.

They always made everything look so easy and natural. It really isn't fair. They never had to stress or doubt in how the other felt for each other. It was always so fucking clear. And its why Mikey didn't get it!

And if he didn't get it, he could very well fucking stuff it.

...

A couple days later finds Richie in a very similar situation. Well, the entire Party really. They're all hanging outside together and it's so fucking familiar that it lets Richie to think back on his *pinning* conversation with Mikey.

Maybe he hasn't had the balls to man up and drop the whole pinning thing into the nearest dumpster and take action... it doesn't mean he's been avoiding the object of his affection. It's actually quite the opposite. He finds himself spending most if not all of his free time with Will-will and happy to do so. What's even better is the smiles he gets when he does.

The downside is that typically, like the majority of the time, he's not alone in spending time with the other teen (*The Party members are seriously fucking co-dependent on one another. It's a major cock blocker*). He's also not alone in putting the smiles on that face which leaves him doubting that the feelings he's been struggling with are even reciprocated.

Of course, Mikey would vehemently get all *moral* and *philosophical* and boringly *ethical* when it comes to helping his one true brother out. Noooooooo, he can't use his empathy and telepathy to confirm whether Richie's love of his life returns the feelings. That

would be *wrong* and an abuse of his powers. Fucking asshole.

Richie glares at this particular thought about his twin. He knows Mikey *knows*. He's just not up for sharing with the rest of the interested parties. Instead, the fucker's probably enjoying watching Richie flail in the dark and be all pathetic and mopey. (*Okay, probably not fair and definitely not true since Mikey is all annoyed that Richie's moping and not doing anything to change the situation but still!*)

"Richie?" Doe Eyes asks carefully, caught off guard by the darkening scowl on the other teen's face. "Everything alright?" The simple question causes Richie's cheeks to warm up and the muscles that had been causing his own very special (*unique mother fuckers*) version of the Wheeler Bitch face to stay in place are forcibly relaxed. A carefree teasing smile takes over instead.

"Just peachy, cutie pie, apple of my eye..."

"That's a lot of fruit in one sentence that's not even about *fruit*." Doe Eyes mutters, shaking his head. "Were you talking to Mike?"

"Uhm... no. Definitely *not*. What made you think I was?"

"You usually frown like that when the two of you are *talking* and you're not liking what he's saying." Richie grumbles something incoherent at the astute observation to give himself time to decide how he can respond to that.

"You got to be staring at my face a whole heck of a lot, sweetheart, to know what the different expressions I make mean. I mean not that I can blame you. This is one fucking handsome mug." There's a slight reddening of the cheeks at the comment but honestly, Doe Eyes is prone to blushing at even the mildest of flirting, so Richie doesn't read too much into it. "I think somebody *li-ikes* me..." He sing-songs and doesn't flinch when a hand gets raised in response. He assumes it's coming to smack him in the arm – the chest maybe. It'll be well deserved and nothing new... and not nearly as hard as the smacks he's gotten for his cheek by Red or Eddie-Spaghetti or Stan the Man or...

The mental list could have gone on. It just stops short when the smack doesn't come and instead, he's just tugged forward in a very abrupt and assertive gesture.

...

Will couldn't say what exactly pushes him to act in that moment. Maybe it's the fact that it's such a normal moment between them. The usual banter, the usual flirting, the usual gang around them but not directly interacting with them.

It's like they're on their own yet not. The rest of the Party members are simply in the periphery of the bubble that Richie and Will have created. It's safe, it's warm, and there's an underlying simple feeling of being content and this being *right* that cannot be underplayed in its importance.

Maybe it's the passing dropping of the joker's mask for just a second, letting that vulnerability and the care and concern Will knows is behind every teasing comment, every overly flirty gesture, every unspoken but taken touch suddenly unfiltered and just sitting there between them.

It's a quiet moment when Richie is typically all movement and all noise.

It's just a moment.

And it's not the first between them that's been like this.

Will knows it won't be the last.

Maybe it's simply the accumulation of all those past moments and the steady and growing reassurance that more will come. Maybe.

So no, Will can't say why it's this one that gets him to make the first move. He just knows that he does. And in this moment, he won't be able to take in how it feels for his fingers to grab hold of the sun touched fabric of Richie's shirt just recently tugged on because Richie is the worst at remembering to use sunscreen and is already turning slightly pink. Will only knows that he uses the soft fabric as a way to tug the taller teen down.

He won't be able to process the startled inhale or the dramatic flail of arms as Richie comes this *close* to honestly losing his balance and face planting into the stony Quarry edge at Will's feet (*and wouldn't that have been the worst EVER*).

Will can just take in the way Richie's eyes widen in surprise, the way his larger yet more delicate looking hands grab a hold of Will wherever they can as a way to compensate the suddenly lost balance (*...and fuck you gravity for nearly ruining this...*) and the grip is strong but it doesn't hurt (*though it does nearly knock him off balance and thank God he's standing on a flat rock, a sturdy and immovable rock*), the way Richie's lips are sort of dry yet warm when they finally touch his own – not quite hitting the mark but still – a kiss.

And it's like they both stop breathing for that moment and when they pull back, Will knows that he is definitely able to take in Richie's still wide eyes of pure unadulterated surprise and hope and question that Will can only answer with a little smile of his own.

"...the fuck, cutie pie? Trying to kill me?" The words are Typical Richie. The way they're said aren't. Soft and awed and vulnerable yet delighted and nervous too. Will is about to answer, he's not sure what, but he feels his mouth parting to say *something* when Richie just pulls him into him this time around, hands dropping from where they're holding on to his elbows to wind around his waist. "Fuck, you drive me absolutely bat shit crazy."

...

Dustin looks over his shoulder curiously to see what Mad Max has seen that could be causing her to be smiling the way she is currently. It's softer than usual and it's just... borderline creepy. What he sees behind him doesn't really answer any of his questions though.

It's just Will and Richie hugging. Which is honestly nothing new. Richie's been flirting with Will since day one, commenting on his *dulcet tones* and the mere memory of that day makes Dustin roll his eyes while still trying to discern if there's anything from the unfolding scene that he's missing.

They've been practically inseparable since Richie and Mike

had freed themselves with Richie's flirting resuming tenfold. From what Dustin could see, the flirty nature was one that was evenly spread. Even he'd been targeted once or twice by that *charm*. He shudders and looks back at Max. "What?"

"What do you mean what?" She's looking at him like he's the one going crazy. He's not.

"You just looked like something utterly adorable was going on back there... or like the love of your life was there... but... since Lucas is working and only going to arrive in like oh... an hour, and it's just Will and Richie and not a basket of kittens and rainbows... what the hell?" The question is stated in a teasing tone but you wouldn't know it with her expression and the way she smacks his shoulder – hard.

"Shut your mouth Henderson and we'll pretend you didn't open it in the first place."

"Jeeze..." He laughs at her, though his hand is rubbing his shoulder and he's *totally* planning on telling Lucas that his girlfriend is a violent sociopath. "Someone's fucking touchy."

A/N - Sooooo I'm working hard on Part III, I promise!!! But in the mean time, please enjoy the missing scene that takes place between Part II and Part III that explains how exactly Will and Richie get together. :P Enjoy the small moment. Here's hoping you all are doing well and staying safe and sound. <3

14. My Family

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Holly is given her first hw assignment / ever/ and it's to write about her family.

Chapter: My Family...

Missing Chappie Between The Other Side and 99 Red Balloons

Holly is excited about the blue composition notebook that's currently safely tucked away in her school backpack. It's pretty and it's clean and it has a special place where she'd painstakingly taken the time to print her name. More than anything else though, it signals that she is truly a big girl now.

She comes home with it, bursting with pride and announces to her mommy excitedly that she's got *homework*. She's never had homework before. And honestly, her brother Richie had always made it sound awful and yucky. But her homework isn't too bad. She answers her mommy's questions happily, already unzipping her backpack to pull out the blue little notebook. She waves it around excitedly, the beautifully white lined pages fluttering about.

"... and we have to write about family!" She watches as her mommy smiles at her, nodding at the announcement while gently trying to nudge her towards the kitchen table. There's already her midday snack waiting for her and that's good because she loves ants on a log. And well, with snacks like that, she can't quite seem to remember why she is so excited about her homework and her notebook in the first place. The little notebook is, while not quite thrown, tossed to the side of the table where it lays there as she starts in on her midday snack. Holly happily chats with her mommy about what exactly happened today between bites of celery crusted peanut butter with raisins on top. And boy were there loads of stuff to share! Like Andy's gross ability to fake farting noises and Ms. Chloe's love for cats and...and...

It's only after she's done with her snack and answering questions that her mommy gently reminds her of her homework assignment. She can work on that while mommy starts making dinner is the suggestion within the reminder. Holly wrinkles her nose, kicking her legs under the table. Her tummy is full and she's not sure she wants to write right this moment. Couldn't it wait?

She whines just a little but sighs, straightening just a smidgeon when her mommy reminds her about what big girls do. And of course, she wants to be a big girl. She *is* a big girl. (*Big girls after all could go with big brothers and do cool things like go skating or even get ice cream...hmm...*).

Holly pulls the notebook to her and opens it up to the first page. After a moment's hesitation, she takes her sharpened pencil and writes her title in long careful strokes like Ms. Chloe had taught her:

My Family

She pauses inspecting her work before nodding to herself and skipping a line before writing a sentence. As she does, she pictures each member of her family, smiling. Her mommy is the easiest to conjure in her mind because she's right here with her. Her mommy is beautiful, and Holly hopes she'll look like *her* when she's even *bigger*! She likes the way her mommy's hair curls and shines in the light and she likes how her mommy smells. She then thinks of her daddy and giggles softly under her breath. Her daddy is tall and big and his stomach is soft. She loves it when she gets to snuggle with him in his armchair and he falls asleep first. It always means she gets to stay just that little bit later and when he finally wakes up (*or is woken up by mommy*), he carefully carries her to bed like all those princess and fairies in her books.

I hav a mommy and a daddy, a sister and 2 bruthers. My daddy lovs watching teevee. My mommy lovs reading. My sister

lives far away in a cotee. My 2 brothers are my favorites.

Holly stops again, going to erase what she views as a mistake and looks at the way the pencil marks smudge slightly where her hand presses on the paper. She erases the smudge cloud, not noticing that as she does, she smears more of the gray down further below. She's humming to herself quietly as she works, careful not to erase too hard and leave holes in the paper. Last time she'd done that she'd gotten so angry and sad, she'd cried like a baby. And she is NOT a baby.

It's true though. As much as she loves Nancy, she loves her brothers even more. They are funnier, and nicer, and they *actually* play with her. They also had all sorts of funny voices and Richie could throw her up in the air so high it felt like she could fly! Mikey gave her piggyback rides and... She stops again.

"Mommy?" She starts and waits patiently for her mommy to turn around and face her. "Why does Richie call you Auntie?" Her foot rocks hard with the question, toes nearly knocking the underside of the table.

"Well," Her mommy starts, drying her hands on a kitchen towel that's printed with Fall leaves. It's pretty but it's not her favorite. She likes the ones with snowflakes and snowmen. Partly because it means Christmas is just around the corner but also because the snowmen were SO cute. "Because I am his aunt." Holly frowns at this answer.

"But he's my brother." She counters. The smile that comes on to her mommy's face is one she's seen before. It's not a happy smile. It's not an angry one either. It's not truly a sad one. It's simply, what Mikey has called before, an in-between one. When someone feels many things at once. Holly thinks she gets it but also knows that she doesn't. It was like happy tears. Why would you cry when you're happy? But apparently you could, and she certainly had in the past. But it was still confusing to her and she never liked it when she felt too many things and hated that she is currently making her mommy feel that way too.

"It's complicated sweetie." Holly hates that answer. She's gotten it too many times before. Like when Mikey and Richie had simply been gone. Everyone had always said "It's complicated" when she would ask them when they were coming home. Her face must express her displeasure at the non-answer because her mom laughs and comes to sit across from her. "Holly, Richie and Mike... they have a different mom. I am their Aunt."

"But...Mikey calls you mom." She grapples with that idea that make no sense to her whatsoever. How could it be that Richie and Mikey have a different mom than mommy? Mike had always been around, and he'd always been her brother. And now Richie was too.

"Their mom couldn't take care of both of them when they were little. That's why Mike was already with us when you were born." Her mom continues, as if reading the confusion and understanding it's root cause.

"Why?" Her mommy looks confused. "Why couldn't she take care of them?" Her mommy looks sad than and Holly bites the bottom of her lip. Maybe she shouldn't have asked.

"Because she was scared... she was scared of a lot of things... but mainly, I think she was scared she wouldn't be able to be a good enough mom to both of them. But she wanted to at least try with one..." The words are said softly, her mommy's hand coming to hold up her own chin.

Holly watches her, feeling both sad and suddenly scared herself. She starts chewing the inside of her cheek but then stops because it hurts, and she doesn't like the taste of blood. It takes away all of the yummy taste that the ants on a log had created in her mouth just minutes earlier.

"Mommy?" She asks, voice frail.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Do you ever get scared?"

“Oh honey,” Her mommy moves, both hands coming to rest on top of the table only so she can shove herself up and away from where she’d been sitting. Almost too quickly, she’s next to Holly and hugging her to her chest. “Honey, of course I get scared sometimes... but not about you. Not about the boys or Nancy. I would never *leave* any of you. I would never give any of you up... never ever.” She whispers into her hair and Holly smushes her face into her mommy’s stomach. It’s not *quite* as soft as her daddy’s but it’s still comforting. The words are soothing to hear. The hug is calming to feel. But more so than that, she’s quieted by how much her mommy knows. Holly hadn’t needed to really verbalize it for her mommy for her to just... *get* what she was actually asking. She stays, face hidden away from the world, in the warm embrace for as long as she can until well, she needs to breathe.

Her mommy laughs at her, when she pushes away, gasping a big breath in. But the laugh is kind and warm, and maybe a little wet. But if her mommy is crying or had cried during the hug, there’s no tears showing when her mommy comes down to her level so they can rub noses together. Her mommy only stands up once Holly is grinning back at her, amused and tickled by the sensation of noses rubbing. Her mommy pets the top of her head gently, fingers carding through her hair.

“Better?” She asks and Holly nods. “Think you can finish your homework, or do you want to help me with dinner?” Holly considers the options before shaking her head.

“I can finish.” She picks up her pencil, toying with it as she wonders what else to write. She doesn’t want to talk about *this* aspect of her family. It’s too weird and sad. Another thought, also stressful, comes to her mind then. “Mommy?”

“Yes, Holly...” Her mommy answers, throwing a look over her shoulder as she’s back to chopping up vegetables.

“Will their mommy ever want them back?”

“No Holly, that’s not going to happen.” Her mommy sounds so sure, it’s reassuring. Part of her wants to ask the why behind the certainty but also, she doesn’t really think she wants to know. She

swallows the question and wiggles in her seat staring at the words she's written. She knows that Ms. Chloe wanted at least seven sentences. She'd said that seven was a magical and powerful number and it would make their writing all the more special if they could write seven sentences.

She counts how many she's written. One, two, three, four, five... She makes another face and kicks both her legs up. This time, her toes do crash on the underside of the table. The noise it causes makes both of them jump and she gets reprimanded.

"I'm sorry..." She says contrite because not only is she a big girl, she's a *good* girl too. Her mommy sighs and tosses the chopped up carrots into a pot.

"Are you having trouble sweetie?" Holly could say yes, but she doesn't want to and so she shakes her head.

Family, family, family. What more to write about her family?

She could talk about grammy and pop-pop but... she doesn't see them that often and to be frank, they sometimes scare her just a little. They're quiet and besides liking that they're close to the beach and that was fun, Holly didn't enjoy when they had to go visit them. She much more preferred staying here, in Hawkins.

What could she write about...?

She starts to draw a flower on the bottom of the page, the way Ellie taught her. She likes Ellie better than Nancy. Ellie was always patient and always listened to her like she was a big girl. Even before she turned six! Ellie didn't talk down to her or anything! And she was never bossy. The thought gives her an idea and she goes back to writing quickly. She then recounts her sentences and smiles. Seven.

It's perfect timing really because the front door opens, and Holly squeals her delight.

"Richie! Mikey! You're home! You're home!" Holly slips off her chair, notebook *completely* forgotten as she runs to tackle both of them. Mikey's the one who catches her first, pulling her into a hug,

laughing at her sheer delight before he literally throws her to Richie. Richie's used to the move despite the way he theatrically makes it seems like he's shocked and scared and that she's too heavy and he's going to drop her. While Richie plays with her, Mikey goes off to greet mommy in the kitchen. She doesn't hear it, but she knows.

When Mikey comes back, he finds Holly and Richie playing who can spin the fastest. She thinks she's won but she's not quite sure as she ends up getting so dizzy she falls onto the ground. Richie follows suit and they end up giggling on the floor together.

"So how was school munchkin?" He asks her, poking her side with a gentle finger.

"Good." She answers in a sing-song voice and rapidly tells them both everything she'd already shared with mommy earlier. Richie seems wounded at learning that she finds fake farting noises gross and not funny. But before he can try and win her over by showing how *he* can make those noises, Mikey cuts in.

"So, mom said we could go meet up with the others. And..." He adds quickly at the way her face starts to fall. "... she said if *someone* finished her homework, that you could come with us."

"Really?!" She hops up from the floor and slams into Mikey in excitement, dizziness clearly forgotten. "I can come? I can come? I finished! I swear I finished. I wrote seven WHOLE sentences. Did you know that seven is magical? Do you know why seven is magical? Ms. Chloe didn't say. Where are we going? Will Ellie and Will and *everyone* be there?" Richie gets up, looking that funny blend of overwhelmed and amused.

"Munchkin, munchkin! Where the fuck did the quiet version of you ever go?! And how the hell are we supposed to answer anything if you keep going?"

"Language!" She sings at him, still holding onto Mikey and stepping on his feet so that he's forced to walk for the both of them. Richie rolls his eyes at her but dutifully follows as Mikey starts making his way to the door, not at all hampered by Holly's weight.

“Yeah Richie, language.” Mikey chortles amused. “And we’re going to the video store downtown to pick up tonight’s movie so yes, we’ll definitely see everyone. And if you’re really good, we may sneak in to get a milkshake. Sound good?” She squeals her excitement, dancing right off his feet so that she can go put on her own shoes.

They leave the house, not knowing that Karen watches them from the kitchen window, smiling gently to herself. It’s only after they’ve long disappeared from her line of vision that she turns away and goes to look over Holly’s homework. The smile that was there at seeing the boys with Holly only grows as she reads over the childish writing and the errors strewn about. The warmth she’d already been experiencing also grows at reading the words.

Karen knew she’d made plenty of mistakes as a parent. But maybe this little paragraph is proof that she isn’t doing too badly after all...

...

When Holly is in bed, already deep asleep with a full belly of ice cream (*knee scrapes from her skateboarding lessons from Richie and Max completely forgotten under her hot purple band aid*), Karen flips the little blue composition notebook open and reads the last line. She feels herself tearing up again, lips straining to smile in spite of the tears.

“Mom?” Mike’s voice asks, concern clear in his tone and he pauses midway through his task of clearing the table.

“I’m alright.” She manages and gives him a crooked smile. “Happy tears.” She watches as her 17-year-old son blinks back in surprise and slowly nods at her. “Want to see what Holly wrote?”

“She wrote something?” Mike comes closer though, eyebrows arched in confusion as he takes the notebook from Karen’s hands. Richie’s not far behind, head popping into the room, towel around his neck and doing little really to catch the drops of water falling from his tousled and very wet hair.

“What’s this?” He comes, lanky form casually draping himself around his twin so he can read over Mike’s shoulder. He smirks even, at the little hissing noise Mike makes when cold water droplets fall from his hair down Mike’s back.

“Holly’s writing for school.” Mike answers dutifully, tone only slightly exasperated but he doesn’t pull away. In fact, he even shifts to accommodate his brother better so they can read the carefully written words together.

My Family

I hav a mommy and a daddy, a sister and 2 bruthers. My daddy lovs watching teevee. My mommy lovs reading. My sister livs far away in a citee. My 2 bruthers are my fayvrit. My bruthers have the bestest frends but ther fayvrits are Ellie and Will and me! My family is lov.

“Fuck...” Richie says softly, throat tight. “The kid really knows how to pull those heartstrings. She’s totally gonna be the death of me.” Neither Mike nor Karen call Richie on his language but they do pull him into a hug which he accepts for a couple heartbeats before saying something *totally* inappropriate and ruining the moment.

Such are the ways of Trashmouth Tozier, ladies and gentlemen.

A/N - Hope all of you are well! I'm definitely sending all of you loads of love and warm fuzzies in case you're in need of a little mental boost. I hope this little snippet brings a smile to your faces. It was inspired by cleaning out my childhood room and discovering all sorts of writings I had to do from first grade and up. I had to laugh (while also being very alarmed) at the way I spelled things way back then.

:P

15. Of First Dates and Pet Names

Summary for the Chapter:

Will and Richie go on their first official date...

Chapter: Of First Dates and Pet Names

Missing chappie from after Part II concludes

It's strange, Will thinks, to be feeling nervous (*in a good way! But still, nervous.*) standing outside the Wheeler home. It's not like he hasn't been here a billion times over – whether to hang out with the entire Party, Mike, Richie or some combination of all three but today's different. Will wrinkles his nose, feeling his cheeks heat up which means he's blushing *again* and Richie's most likely going to pile it on until he's just one very bright tomato (*probably stammering*) version of himself. How the hell he's going to get through today is beyond him. His palms are sweaty, his heart rate's up, his stomach is in absolute knots, and...

Will shakes his head.

How do people do *this*?

Lucas and Max make it seem fun (*bizarre, sometimes stressful but all in all, fun and playful even, as if they've found the perfect blend of bringing their childhood into the most turbulent waters of adolescence, dealing with hormones with bickering and teasing, fake break ups and not so subtle make out sessions when they eventually get back together*) and well, Mike and El really shouldn't even *count* as they're out of this world. They make everything seem both easy, seamless, and full of heart wrenching drama at the slightest impediment that would separate them from one another's side for any significant amount of time. Will loves them. He does, dearly. But they can be a bit much and definitely not an example that anyone should hope to aspire to. Nancy and Jonathan seem more of a regular couple but they're older and more serious (*as if anyone can be more serious than the soulmates.*

Maybe mature is the word Will's looking for...). Still, it's hard to know exactly what they're like as a couple as they're rarely home since leaving for college and Jonathan has always been and still is, incredibly private.

Will sighs, rubbing at his cheek.

It's fine. It's going to be fun. His brain tries to calm him down. He's hung out with Richie plenty of times. Granted, the number of times it's just been the two of them, he can still count on one hand but, they'd had a blast every single time, listening to some mixed tapes while bemoaning Mike's *tragic* taste in music, and even figuring out which movie to try and convince the Party to check out ahead of time. Sometimes they'd just walked outside, letting Chester run circles all around them, with Richie regaling him with some story or trying out his new jokes on him (*some definitely got beep-beeped right off the bat while others had left him bent in half, tears running down his face and a painful stitch in his side due to how hard Richie could get him laughing*).

Just because it's an official *date* didn't mean things had to change, right?

His brain gives a mix of contradictory answers while his body clearly is telling him that, yes, things *will* change. He is excited for those changes, wants to experience those changes and see what it's all about and at the same time, he's so nervous he wants to puke, scream into a nonexistent pillow while running around in circles, and hide into a ball under his covers, safe and sound under his blanket. All of these things all at the same time and it's been like this since Richie *asked* him three days ago.

Granted, the nerves had been more excitement in the beginning (*a little bit of shock too. Despite their one shared kiss, things had just gone back to normal, the Party members always being around them providing a protective layer of sorts where they could hide from any lingering embarrassment or awkwardness that will surely descend now when they're left to their own device. And oh shit. It's dawning on Will that this will be their first time alone together since the kiss...oh...oh no...*). Now Will thinks there's actual fear mixed in with the excitement too.

What if he's bad at this? What if Richie realizes that Will is actually boring? What if it doesn't work out and their friendship is ruined and...

The door opens and Mike's standing there with a concerned look on his face. Will has yet to knock or ring the doorbell. That's how far gone he's been in working himself into a right tizzy. Still, he doesn't even blink at the fact that Mike's here anyway, totally aware that Will's here and freaking out.

"You okay Will?"

Will nods despite actually wanting to (*not cry*) ask for help or maybe a way to back out.

"Right, 'cause that's convincing." Mike mutters under his breath and sighs. He takes a step partially outside the house, not quite closing the door behind him. "Look, Will, it's okay... Richie's nervous as all get out too and has been even before he got the balls to ask you out, if it helps knowing. And hell, I *was* nervous on my first date with El. Also, seriously don't tell Lucas, but, he totally threw up before his first official date with Max. He says it was food poisoning, but I just don't buy it." The words are thrown his way so quickly it takes Will a bit before he can process any of it. When it does though, he just looks at Mike with huge eyes, knowing they look pleading in that... *what all you said better be true, Mike because...* and also, *why didn't you tell me that? Why didn't Lucas tell us that?* "Awh man, please don't look at me like that Will. It makes his nonsensical nicknames for you make way too much sense."

"What?" Will's confusion at the random observation at least distracts him enough that Mike seems to come up with some sort of conclusion or plan. His friend takes a step back into the house, ushering Will in right alongside him.

"Richie!" Mike's yelling before Will can say anything or even try and poke an answer out of Mike. "Get your butt down here! Bambi's here!" There's a loud *thud* that can be heard from upstairs, almost like someone falling from a bed, before it's followed with frantic scurrying and the slamming of a door. Mike's grinning in a way that is unusual. Unless you're one of his siblings that is. Richie

knows that grin (*fucking smirk*) all too well. Nancy too – especially when Mike’s plotting to ruin her scrambled eggs, little fucker that he can be. But it’s unusual for Will who is staring at him like he’s seeing his friend for the very first time. “Make him squirm Will and have fun, ok?” He mutters lowly just in time for Richie to have reached the last step, *completely* beet red and looking thunderous. Mike raises his hands, smirk dropping for an overly forced innocent look that fools absolutely no one and he can’t quite evade the punch Richie lands on his shoulder *hard* as he tries to make it up the stairs.

“I fucking hate you.” Will thinks is what he hears Richie growl at his twin before it’s just the two of them. If Will’s eyes could get wider, they would be. He blinks at Richie.

“Uhm?” Funnily enough, his nerves are gone, his caring nature completely triggered at seeing Richie so flustered. “Are you ok?”

“Fiiiine...Mikey baby thinks he’s so funny. He should leave the comedy to me...asshole.”

“Okay...Well, I guess we should go?” Richie nods vehemently, still pink in the cheeks and opens the door, bowing lowly to gesture that Will go first.

They walk alongside their bikes quietly for at least half the block before Will finally can’t keep his curiosity bottled in any longer.

“I’m sorry, I have to ask, Bambi?!” Cue Richie going back to full red, and Will has to chuckle just a bit, although he tries to look contrite and apologetic right away. (*It’s in this moment that he’ll gain the true appreciation of the feeling that bubbles up in him whenever Richie blushes. And it’s addictive.*) Richie groans, stopping, hiding his face in the crook of his elbow briefly which only leads to Will stopping as well, amusement and fondness growing at seeing how beautifully and weirdly contorted Richie is in this moment (*it makes his hands itch to pick up a pad of paper and sketch the scene*). He moves to balance his bike more on his hip so he can reach over to ruffle the back of Richie’s head instead, curls soft to the touch.

“Fuck,” Richie grouses. “Leave it to Mikey to be in my head *all* the time and still get it wrong.” He sighs, peering up, dark eyes catching Will’s and Will has the distinct impression that Richie is pouting.

“So not Bambi?” Will prompts, biting his lip to keep from smiling too hard.

“No, but it’s close.” Richie grumbles, clearly still distinctly off his game and very embarrassed. It’s both funny and perplexing. Richie’s called Will so many nicknames before, some entirely flustering for Will, especially when they’re in public, so he wonders why this one is different. Why it’s never been revealed out loud before...

“And... can I hear it, or do I need to guess?” (*Is this flirting? It feels awfully close to teasing but there’s just the slightest hint that makes it different. A bit more thrilling?*) Richie’s still looking at him, and Will keeps the eye contact, knowing (*feeling*) as his own cheeks start to warm too under the observation.

“Doe Eyes,” The answer seems to come despite Richie, said almost too softly, as if there’s something almost vulnerable wrapped around the nickname that Will doesn’t quite get. He finds himself blinking, caught in the vulnerability and the sudden serious feel between them.

“Oh.” Will can’t think of anything else to say. It definitely sounds like it’s in line with *cutie pie*, *apple of my eye*, *sweetheart*, and *darling* but to Richie it’s different. Will offers Richie a soft, albeit confused, smile. “Doe Eyes, huh?” (*Will’s noticed the girls do this fluttery thing with their eyelashes and actually, Dustin too, although his was more in mimicry and he doesn’t quite understand why he’s even thinking about it or why he feels the pull to want to even imitate that because it’s just silly and he’s never understood the appeal but yet, if Richie likes his eyes...well... that does something to his stomach that is appealing.*)

“Hm.” Richie mumbles incoherently although a tightness that had been running through his lanky body seems to be loosening bit by bit.

"I like it..." Will realizes belatedly that his fingers are still mindlessly playing with Richie's curls and that it's effectively keeping Richie in his bent position. He flushes hard before drawing his hand back to his side.

The two drop the topic without explicitly agreeing on doing so and the date ends up being both expected and unexpected, fun and yes, nerve wracking but worth *everything*.

...

Mikey is in their shared bedroom when Richie finally comes home. He's smirking, the bastard, but Richie is still on way too much of a fucking high from a successful date with *his* Doe Eyes that he could care less that Mikey's smirking. He ignores his twin in favor of heading straight to his bed, falling onto his back with a boneless sort of grace, hands quick to weave behind his head as a makeshift pillow. He's more than happy to stay in his little elated bubble, reliving the highlights and...

Their shared radio is flicked on, and he can hear as Mikey pops open the tape deck, slipping in no doubt one of his cringey ass mixed tapes that is too everything that's wrong with overly commercialized music in today's industry. Usually, Richie would rag on his twin's music, and they'd tussle for control of the radio but not today! Nothing's going to get in his way of remembering all the ways Doe Eyes is going to be the fucking death of him in all the right ways.

The beat starts off first, picking up steadily and the singer's voice breaks through, sounding much too serious for what's clearly going to turn out to be a sappy ass romantic song that's a dime a dozen. Still, (*and probably because of its similarity to other songs*) the tune is easy enough to ignore.

Richie only honestly starts to tune in when Mikey sits on the mattress next to him, jostling him out of his reverie.

"So, how was the date with Bambi eyes anyway?"

/Love... I get so lost sometimes. Days pass and this emptiness fills my heart. When I want to run away, I drive off in my car but whichever way

I go, I come back to the place you are... /

"I hate you." Richie grumbles, trying to shove his twin away from him as his heart misses a bit at hearing his what used to be secret nickname for Doe Eyes anyway. "And you couldn't get it right? Why'd you go butchering it making it sound like I have a fucking crush on a Disney character?"

/All my instincts, they return. The grand façade, so soon will burn. Without a noise, without my pride. I reach out from the inside/

"Technically Bambi's a character in a novel before Disney got it's hand on it." Mikey points out, smirk spreading his lips in a way that makes Richie scowl at him darkly. God fucking damn it. He'd been so happy too reliving his date. Why's his twin suddenly all social?

/In your eyes... the light, the heat (in your eyes), I am complete (in your eyes), I see the doorway (in your eyes), to a thousand churches (in your eyes), the resolution (in your eyes), of all the fruitless searches (in your eyes)/

"Fucking nerd, of course you'd know that. Get off my bed and begone, foul beast." He says, trying to sound disgusted but he just ends up sounding exasperated. It's here that the lyrics of the stupid pop song starts to sink in and oh, if looks could kill! Mikey's outright laughing as he sees the sudden *click*. The sudden realization.

"Could be *your* song with him. Just think, it's *perfect!*" Mikey croons, jumping off the side of the bed barely missing the hands swiping to grab him with plans to pummel him to death. "Oh, I see the light and the heat, *in your eyes...*" Mikey starts to sing along with the song and Richie is going to *fucking KILL* his brother. "I am complete, *in your eyes.*" He twirls away, continuing to skillfully evade Richie and yeah, that's it. Richie's totally going to murder him. So sorry Princess. But there's only so much he can take and Mikey's totally crossing a line.

"Oooh, I LOVE this song!" Hols' cute little innocent voice chirps in their open doorway excitedly. "What are you two playing? Are we singing? Can I join?"

Mikey cackles, opening his arms and accepting Hols' tackle leap.

"Course, it's Richie's *new* favorite song. Let's serenade him, k?"

"Let's fucking NOT!" Richie fumes but he knows now that he'll fold like a cheap suit. His little cousin looks ways too happy and she's belting out the song (*only slightly off tune*) with way too much heart. He'll get Mikey back later.

"In your eyes, your eyes, your eyes!" The little girl sings, and Richie shakes his head, falling back on the bed, making a show of being dramatic as he fakes trying to plug his ears. Whatever. So, he had a thing for eyes. Will's eyes to be specific. There was no fucking shame about that. Will, Doe Eyes, had gorgeous eyes.

Richie smirks where he lays and doesn't react when his (*traitor*) twin and cousin end up rewinding the tape to play the song once more.

He will react a couple days later (*rather violently*) when the song is played BLARINGLY loud when Does Eyes comes to the Wheeler household next. No one ever clues Doe Eyes as to why the song turns Richie into a stuttering tomato ready to strangle Mikey. But that's okay (*he hopes*). He just tries to not feel bad as he enjoys the sight of Richie blushing while also trying to keep both of the twins alive and not fighting.

A/N – Song is "Your Eyes" sung by Peter Gabriel. All I can say to defend this is that my brain obviously needed something saccharine sweet and funny. :P I hope it brings a smile on all your faces.